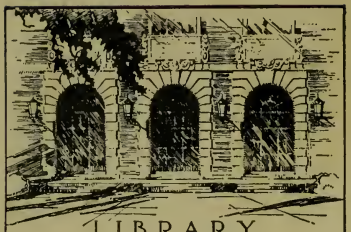

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MRS. ARTHUR.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"The Chronicles of Carlingford,"

&c. &c.

"Fie, fie! unknit that threat'ning, unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes.
. . . . . .
A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled."

TAMING OF THE SHREW.

"He breathed a sigh, and toasted Nancy!"

DIBDIN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
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MRS. ARTHUR.

CHAPTER I.

IT was like a dream when it was all over, so huddled up at the end, so seemingly causeless; the sudden outburst of accumulated dissatisfaction and failure breaking out in a moment, a storm out of a clear sky, as it were. There was no adequate reason for the catastrophe; greater troubles had been between them before, more violent disputes; perhaps it was that never before had there been any witnesses, nor had the menace ever before come from Arthur's side. When he left Underhayes, almost carried off by Durant, yet with many stings in his heart, which in time, at least, might slay the love that was still warm within him,

Arthur could think of his married life only as a dream. Nancy had refused to see him. She would make no arrangement, listen to no terms, make no promises; indeed, she would not communicate with her husband or his friend except through her parents, and refused to say anything except that all was over, that she never wanted to hear Arthur's name again. The father and mother were without any question deeply distressed. Mrs. Bates was, on the whole, a sensible woman, who, though she might be disposed to back up her married daughter in a certain amount of folly and hot-headedness as to the honours and privileges which were "no more than what she had a right to," was yet horrified at the notion of practical divorce and disjunction such as this; and her husband not only shared this moral horror, but was profoundly excited by the idea of having his daughter, whom he had believed to be provided for, once more on his hands. All through that long Sunday, and for some days after, Durant did nothing but come and go between the two houses with pro-

posals of all kinds. If Nancy would not return, would she join Arthur in London and go to Oakley with him? If she would not go to Oakley, would she go to Vienna, where they could make a fresh start, having both, it was to be hoped, learned a tremendous lesson? To all these suggestions Nancy answered No. She kept upstairs, locking her door, when her husband himself came. No, she would do nothing. She would not go to his friends to be despised. She would not go abroad with him to be miserable. He knew how she hated foreign countries. She would not go home to him, or see him to discuss these questions. He could go where he pleased, she would not put herself in his way. She would not shame him among his fine friends. Nobody should say she was a burden on her husband. It is impossible to imagine anything more confused, more agitated, more feverish than the course of these painful days; but at last it became apparent even to Arthur that this could go on no longer. Many little indications of a state of things which he had never dreamt of, and which

was fatal to the self-esteem which is in every man's bosom, worked on the poor young fellow's mind as much as the actual grievance of the moment. That he had been thought of as a good match was, perhaps, inevitable in the circumstances; but even that is not agreeable; and to know that your wife has gone to her father's house to complain of you, is an offence which few men could easily forgive. All this produced in Arthur's mind an impression of painful unreality in the past than which there is nothing more wounding, more bitter on earth. That love should fail and hearts change is bad enough; but that the love which you have believed in implicitly should never have existed at all, that your affection should have been regarded as a matter of worldly advantage, and your conduct discussed with others, what thought can sting more deeply? It destroyed not only Arthur's faith in his wife, but his faith in the life they had lived together. Hitherto it had been her too great sincerity, her incapacity for feigning, he thought, poor fellow, which had been

their rock ahead. And now was all insincere, was all feigned from beginning to end? His head seemed to turn, and the giddy world to go round with him, and that wrath "which works like madness in the brain," the wrath which is half love, and which feels every injury with twofold aggravation of resentment, yet yearning, took possession of his mind. It was in this condition that he left Underhayes. Durant had made on Arthur's behalf the most careful arrangements for Nancy with her father. She was to retain the villa if she chose, and the half of the allowance Sir John gave to his son. Arthur would have given the whole, had that been possible. As it was she would be well off, able to do as she pleased, according to her breeding, to help her family, to occupy an important position among them. The poor young fellow thought with bitterness that this would be more congenial to her than any elevation which could have reached her with him; and perhaps, indeed, there was some reason in this, for the elevations which could reach her as Arthur's wife were, in a sense,

humiliations. Everybody in his rank looked upon her with wonder, with curiosity and suspicion, as on a creature of a different race. Her actions were scrutinized, her little imperfections noted as they never would have been otherwise. Whereas as the richest member of the family, the one standing above them all at once by nature and by position, the family goddess and beauty, and most successful member, Nancy was looked up to and adored. Perhaps it was not wonderful that a young creature with no sense of duty in her, who had expected merely, as Arthur said, to be made happy, flattered, courted, and caressed in her marriage, and to whom such disappointment had come, should prefer the position in which she could regain a little of the self-pride and complacency which was natural to her. The first blow which assails that complacency, how terrible it is! And Nancy had been beaten down, though she would not own it, by the sense of universal disapproval, by the failure even of her own confidence in herself.

And it would be impossible to describe

the strange desolation and sense that all was over and ended, with which this self-willed and hot-headed girl woke to her misery on the morning after Arthur went away. The probation of the last few months had been very bad for Nancy. She was not altogether unworthy, as poor Arthur was inclined to think, of the higher opinion which had been formed of her; indeed it was the finer element in her nature which had led her astray in the final strain and trial. She who had been the superior of her family, who had been raised to the poetic heaven of a young lover's adoration, had after her marriage plunged at once into a bottomless abyss of inferiority and humiliation. It had begun upon her wedding-day with the vision of Lucy, in whom her jealous, suddenly enlightened eyes had seen at a glance so many differences, so many refinements unknown to herself—and with Arthur's objection to her salmon-coloured dress. Then her ignorance, her want even of the most elementary acquaintance with the world he was familiar with, was brought home to the

alarmed, resentful girl on every side of her. The more she found herself wanting, the hotter had risen that suppressed fury in her heart against herself, her belongings, her breeding, and the new circumstances which brought out all their deficiencies. Pride first, and the vanity of flattered and self-admiring youth had risen wildly against the apparent need of improvement, of education and culture, which alone would have fitted her to be Arthur's wife; and if she rejected with proud disgust and self-assertion the idea of improvement in herself, what was there for it but to turn her back upon Arthur's world and drag him into her own, where she was at her ease, where she was still the first, whatever happened? This, however, had not contented Nancy's mind. She had been no more satisfied here than elsewhere. The mere fact of withdrawing her husband into this village atmosphere, which he supported patiently or impatiently, according to the mood of the moment, but always with an effort, was in itself a confession of failure. She was unfit for the society of

his equals; and he, was not he unfit for hers? None of these things had Nancy said to herself, but they were all surging within, pushing her on by their very tumult and unrest to ever more and more entire committal of herself to this foolish and wrong way.

Nobody knew better than she how foolish it was and wrong; but the more the conviction grew, the more ungovernable was her determination to be stopped by no one, to yield to no one, to assert herself as everybody's equal or superior, claiming in her own right all the consideration that a princess could command. She had never put these feelings into words, passionate and vehement though they were, nor had she anyone in the world to whom she could confide them. Poor girl! the conflict in her mind had often been beyond utterance; but she had clung desperately all through to that most variable and poorest of supports her personal pride. And this had driven her into all manner of follies, as has been seen, and into this culminating folly at last. She lay sleepless all the night

through, and wept, thinking of Arthur. It would be better for him. No more would that anxious look come over his face, the look which had driven her wild and made her ruder and more self-assertive than ever, that anxiety as to her behaviour and her appearance which made her tingle with the consciousness that she was still Nancy Bates, and would still be judged as such, whatever might happen. He would not be troubled with Nancy Bates now. He would go back untrammeled among his fine friends, where nobody made mistakes in dress, and where everybody knew as their A B C those things which were mysteries to her. He would be free; Nancy jumped up in her bed clenching her hands, her eyes heavy, her head hot, her brain almost mad with passion—he would be free! and she left here to be sneered at, and smiled at, and pointed at—a wife, a woman who had been forsaken. Then this furious sense of humiliation would melt, and burst forth into a sense of something better which she had concealed, which no one had ever known. She had

been a failure; but who would love him so well as she did among all the fine people he might meet with? who would think of him so much? She, thinking of him, had brought little happiness to Arthur; her love had been as a fire which scorched and charred rather than one which warmed and gladdened—but still, if anything happened to him, if trouble came in his way, who would be faithful like his wife, faithful to death, ready to confront every danger for him; but that he would never know. The convulsions of feeling which she thus went through fortunately made Nancy ill. For a day or two she was feverish, and kept her bed, where she was waited on with sedulous care by her mother and sisters. They had never failed in kindness or affection, but they were now more anxious, more concerned than ever, for Nancy was still the great person of the family. She was rich in comparison with them. She had a house of her own—she was a lady. Numberless benefits might flow to them from her hands. This was not necessary to make these good people

kind to their own flesh and blood; but still such considerations warm and quicken human feeling. They were not fond of Nancy for what she had to bestow, but the fact that she had something to bestow did not diminish their fondness. They hushed the house and kept it still, making Charley's life miserable, and the father's a burden to him, for Nancy's sake. It was her nerves, poor thing, they said, and everything had to give way to Nancy's nerves—things hitherto unknown in the house.

When, however, Nancy came downstairs at last, after her bout of illness, she experienced not only the horrible sense of re-beginning which wrings the soul after any great calamity, but a sudden and fantastic increase of misery in the disgust which seized upon her for all her surroundings. Not only had she a new life to begin without Arthur, without hope, without any future widening of her horizon possible; but the home which she had sought so anxiously, and to which she had clung in opposition to Arthur and defiance

of him, suddenly changed its aspect to her. She felt it the first afternoon when she came downstairs supported, though it was unnecessary, by her anxious mother, and was placed in the old easy-chair by the fire, which was burning brightly, though it was not necessary either, on this soft spring afternoon. She had scarcely sat down in the chair, which was her father's chair, close to the fire and to the little mahogany bracket on which he placed his rum-and-water, when this sudden loathing seized her. The afternoon sun was shining into the room, betraying dust where dust was not expected, showing the imperfections of everything—the old haircloth sofa in the corner, the not very clean carpet, the table covered with painted oil-cloth. Meanness, smallness, poverty seemed to have come into every detail. The air was too warm, and it was not fresh, but retained odours of the dinner, of the beer and cheese with which it had been concluded; for Mrs. Bates had not liked to open the window to chill the air for the invalid. What spell had fallen

upon this room, which she had so longed for, and which she had returned to with such content? How mean it looked, what a contracted, paltry place, unlovely, unsweet! And it was to this that she had dragged Arthur! this was the thought that flew like an arrow through Nancy's mind. They brought a little tray with tea, and hot muffins to tempt her invalid appetite, and Mrs. Bates was at once alarmed and vexed when she pushed it peevishly away and declined to eat.

"You all know I can't bear muffins!" cried Nancy, pushing it away rudely; and her own action made her sick with self-disgust as she noted unconsciously how rude, how ungracious and ungrateful it was. Yes, she was like the place, rude, ill-bred, not a lady! She could have cried, but she was too proud to cry, and instead of this innocent relief to her mind, became cross in her wretchedness and found fault with everything. "Oh, how hot it is!" she cried, "how can you live in this stifling atmosphere? One would think you were always having dinner, it is so stuffy—open

the window for pity sake!" But when the window was open she began to shiver. "There is not a corner that is out of the draught," she said. Nothing that they did pleased her. Sarah Jane's noisy ways, as she went sweeping about, knocking down a chair here and a footstool there, sweeping against the table, were insupportable, and Matilda's demure quietness not much better. Everything grated on Nancy. And this was where she had brought Arthur! and had been angry that he was not delighted; and now Arthur was gone never to be found any more. Oh, how her heart sank in her miserable bosom! Then came tea, the tray placed upon the oilcloth, and hot toast this time brought to her instead of the muffins. The room was full now, her father and Charley added to the group of women. Mr. Bates looked at her when he came in, sitting in his chair, with a "humph!" of disapproval. Was she not only to be a failure as far as all their hopes were concerned, but to occupy his place also and put everybody out? Nancy

saw the look, and jumped up in hot resentment.

"Oh, you shall have your chair!" she cried, and retreated to the sofa, where her mother feared she would take cold, so far from the fire. "Cold!" cried Nancy, "I think I shall never be cool again. You don't know how stuffy it is in this close little room."

"Upon my word!" said Sarah Jane. "Nobody's obliged to stay here. It is good enough for us, and so it might be for Nancy. I don't see that she's any better than the rest."

"Oh, hold your tongue, Sarah Jane," cried Mrs. Bates; "can't you see that your poor sister is poorly and out of sorts?" But neither did she like to hear the parlour called stuffy. If it was good enough for the others, why was it not good enough for Nancy? And then the family settled to their evening occupations, and the lamp was brought in, which added the smell of paraffin to that of the tea. And then Mr. Bates had his rum-and-water; and Mr. Raisins came to visit

Sarah Jane. He came in with a witty greeting to the family, which made them all laugh.

"Here we are again! and how was you all?" he said, with refined jocosity; and was making his way to the sofa, which was the lover's corner, when he saw Nancy there, and drew up with a significant look of dismay and a prolonged whistle of surprise. Nancy could bear it no longer. She started up with a cry of anger, and flew up-stairs to her room, sick with disgust and misery.

"Do you like to see me insulted, mamma?" she said, when Mrs. Bates followed. "How can you endure that vulgar fellow? and how dares he show his insolence to me?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Bates, "you must not be unreasonable. He did not mean to be insolent. If we have not the refinements you have been used to, Nancy, still you mustn't forget the advantages of your old home—"

"Advantages!" Nancy murmured under her breath, but pride kept down the cry.

Had not she sacrificed her life for these advantages, cast her own existence to the winds? She went to bed miserable, and cried herself to sleep.

This was but a melancholy beginning to the new life. When she heard afterwards the arrangements that Arthur had made for her comfort, her first impulse was to accept nothing.

"I am no wife to him," she cried, "and why should I take his money? I will not take his money. What am I to Arthur now that he should maintain me? It is like taking charity."

But here Mr. Bates came in, who had a certain authority in such matters, if not a great deal of influence in other ways. Mr. Bates would stand no nonsense. It was bad enough that the responsibility of his daughter, and her behaviour as a married woman separated from her husband, should fall upon her parents; but her support certainly should not, of that he was clear. And Nancy, fresh from all these conflicts and miseries, was cowed before her father, and dared not resist

him, notwithstanding all her efforts to hold her own. She who had not yielded to Arthur's love and generosity, yielded to the tax-collector's practical decidedness. She could not help herself. And after a few days' growing wretchedness in this "home," for which she had sacrificed so much, Nancy was glad to retire to the villa with the sensible Matilda for her companion, and begin again as she best could in such changed and fallen circumstances the career so perversely cut short. At least it was a relief to get away from the stuffy parlour, and the rum-and-water, and the grocer's wit and courtship—all of which, heaven forgive her, she had called upon her husband to endure.

In two years from this time, strangely enough, the Bates family and almost all trace of them disappeared from Underhayes. Nothing had happened to them for all Nancy's lifetime till her marriage—nothing of an exciting kind. There had been neither misfortune nor great success in the house; but all had gone on with hum-

drum regularity, unexciting, unalarming. Mr. Bates had got a little mild promotion, and they had saved a very little money, and for the rest had eaten and drunk, and slept and woke, and all had been as if it might thus go on for ever. So flows the tranquil current of life, in many cases, for years and years, until at length the cycle of change commences, and all that has been done is undone. Nancy's marriage was the first family event, but it was followed in close succession by others. Charley went to New Zealand shortly after the separation between Arthur Curtis and his wife. Then a little after Sarah Jane married. Then Mr. Bates, in the midst of his tax-collecting, had an accident, and after lingering for a time died; and Mrs. Bates, a person of apparently robust constitution, both bodily and mental, developed all at once, to the amazement of her family and friends, an incapacity to live without the man whom she had not been very enthusiastic about, or devoted to, during his lifetime, and died in her turn, leaving her house desolate. Matilda, the only representative of the

name, would have joined Charley in New Zealand but for her sister, to whom she had proved a discreet and faithful companion. After, however, the little house was cleared, and all the old furniture dispersed, sold, or laid up in the house of the Raisins' for their future use, the two elder sisters disappeared, no one, except, perhaps, Sarah Jane, who said nothing about it, knowing whither. The little parlour passed away, like all the teas and dinners that had been consumed there, and the family existence ended. Notwithstanding the moving events that had been transacted in it, and the temporary link which had been woven between it and the upper classes of society, its history was all over like a bubble, like the snow on the mountain and the foam on the river. The same fate befalls small and great; but in the case of a tax-collector the conclusion is more complete than that which comes upon the higher classes, which Mr. Bates respected so much. Death, emigration, marriage, disappearance, thus followed each other in swift succession. Young Mrs. Raisins,

blooming in her shop—where, however, her bridegroom did not permit her to appear to minister to the wants of a vulgar public, keeping her, on the contrary, in high happiness and splendour, and without requiring her to do anything, in her drawing-room above the shop—alone remained of the family in Underhayes. And as for Nancy, no one knew anything about her, nor where she had gone.

CHAPTER II.

EVERYTHING went on very quietly at Oakley during these two years. Arthur's visit at home was very brief, and not very lively. And if there was a temporary sense of relief in Lady Curtis's mind to know that he had escaped from the influence of "those people" and "that young woman," it soon disappeared in presence of Arthur's melancholy looks, and in contemplation of the painful position of a man so young, who was married, and yet not married, and whose path, accordingly, could not but be full of thorns and troubles. Such a position is dangerous and difficult in any sphere; but how much more in that to which he was going, where every temptation of society

would surround the young man, and every freedom would be accorded to him! The mother and sister had many a discussion over him; but how difficult it was to question him on the subject, to pry into those arrangements of his which he did not care to reveal, or to ask anything about the final causes of the separation! Arthur, for his part, did not speak on the subject; when he arrived, at first, he had let them know, in a few words, that his wife and he had parted. "Don't ask me about it, for I can't tell you. I don't know how it is," he had said to his mother. "She will not conform to my way of living, and I cannot conform to hers—that is all. There is no blame; but how it happened, don't ask me, for I don't know." Lady Curtis respected the request absolutely, and inquired no more of him. But it is needless to say how interesting the subject was to her; and with what eagerness she endeavoured to get the information otherwise which Arthur would not furnish. Durant told her all that he knew personally, all that happened under his

own eyes; but this was not much more satisfactory than Arthur's silence. "He has an air of thinking that she was not so very much in the wrong after all," Lady Curtis said. "I do not understand Lewis. You would almost think, from the letters he writes, that she had bewitched him too."

"I don't think so," Lucy said quickly, with a passing look upon her face which surprised her mother.

"I don't mean to say anything against her," said Lady Curtis. "It is not to be supposed that she has any great fault. God forbid, Lucy! I did not mean that."

Lucy did not make any reply. It was not, perhaps, her brother's wife she was thinking of. And when Arthur went away, Nancy became as if she had never existed to the family. They had Arthur's letters as in the days when nothing lay between him and home; nothing but mere distance and absence—time and space, innocent obstacles which harm no one, though they are hard enough to put up with. And his wife, whom he ceased to speak of, fell into the background with

his people. To be sure, when any young man in the county, or whom they knew, made a brilliant and satisfactory marriage, Lady Curtis and Lucy would look at each other with quick interchange of glances. And Sir John would come in, in the afternoon, and set his back against the mantel-piece, while he took his cup of tea, and say with a sigh, "They seem to be making a great fuss over young Seymour's marriage."

"Yes," Lady Curtis would answer with another sigh, "and no wonder—nothing could be more suitable." They were almost angry with young Seymour for marrying as the heir to such a property ought to have married; and, probably, Lucy would launch some arrow at the new pair in sheer impatience of the praise thus accorded. "So suitable that it is unnecessary to think of love in the matter," Lucy perhaps would say. And then Sir John would shrug his shoulders as he stood before the fire.

"Love! that's neither here nor there; if all the follies could be collected that

have been done in the name of love!" And he would shake his grey old head, and again sigh, looking with eyes of admiration at Lucy as he went slowly back to his library, not able to get young Seymour and his fine marriage out of his head. Lady Curtis broke into a smile against her will as he went away.

"You are not to think of any such folly, Lucy," she said, "your father thinks that with your fortune you would be very happy unmarried. He says it is only poor people who need fear the fate of old maids. This is a great step for Sir John to take, who is such a Conservative."

"Are old maids against the Tory faith?" said Lucy, not sorry to have something to say.

"Yes; it is the ancient creed that every woman should marry, and that it is only the ugly, the cross, and the unloveable that fail to attain that glorious end. What a stretch of principle this is for your father! *I* do not go so far even with my advanced views."

Lady Curtis looked at her daughter

curiously as she spoke. They spent their lives together, hour by hour and year by year. They had everything in common —when the post came in, they opened each other's letters indiscriminately, the last depth of mutual confidence; read the same books, thought the same thoughts, were one in all the affairs of life; and yet in this most intimate affair of all, the mother looked at the daughter with unutterable yearnings of curiosity, not knowing what Lucy thought.

Nothing was said for some time after. Spring had come breathing over the woods, and to look between the pillars of the façade through the long windows of my lady's room upon the avenue, was like looking into a wilderness of buds and hopes. "Here is Bertie coming again," she said with a little impatience; then laughing, "he is one, Lucy, of whom your father is afraid."

"Poor Bertie!" said Lucy composedly; but she was startled into dismay when her mother suddenly burst into tears.

"To think," said Lady Curtis, "that

Bertie's child, if he had a child, would be your father's heir!"

"Mamma!" Lucy blushed crimson, then laughed. "He is the second son—and Arthur—"

"Arthur will never have any children," said Lady Curtis gloomily, "if things do not change. And she is young and strong, as young as you are—why should she die to accommodate us? And Gerald Curtis is a wandering invalid. Ah! there is no fear of the Seymours—they will have their own flesh and blood after them whatever happens. But your father is growing an old man, Lucy; and Bertie—Bertie's son will be the heir!"

"He is not even married yet; there can be no need for vexing ourselves over such a remote contingency."

"But it will happen," said Arthur's mother, "though it is so remote. My boy is like Warrington, in 'Pendennis,' Lucy, shut off from life; no child for him, no love for him; all because of one foolish, foolish step when he was nothing but a boy!"

"But, mamma! you really do not mean that boys should be permitted to escape the consequences of such foolish steps," cried Lucy. "How unlike you to say so!"

"Ah! one becomes unlike one's self when it is one's self that suffers," said Lady Curtis with a sigh.

And then Bertie made his appearance, and all feeling was banished from her countenance. She discussed young Seymour's marriage with interest. "Nothing could have been more suitable. So suitable that one felt something must interpose to put a stop to it. The girl of all others he ought to have married! And a charming girl—pretty and well-bred, and sweet—"

"I hear they are all immensely pleased; but I do not admire her so much as you do. She is not the style I care for," said the Rector. "She is too charming, and too sensible, and too everything she ought to be—for me."

"Faultily faultless," said Lady Curtis smiling. She was pleased that he did not approve of young Seymour's perfect wife.

"And she is heavy," said Bertie. "I used to know her very well. Her brother was of my college. She will not be an addition to the gaiety of the family. She has not very much to say for herself."

"All the more suitable," Lady Curtis said, brightening visibly, "they are all heavy." She had never liked Bertie so well. She told him the news in Arthur's last letter, that he was liking Vienna very much, and happy in his new position; and wound up by an invitation to dinner. Lucy sat by and worked, and wondered, not without a smile about the corners of her mouth. She had no objection to her cousin, nor any alarm of him in her mind. He was "not the style she cared for," she said to herself with a mocking echo of his speech; but that Lady Curtis, after her melancholy anticipation of the inevitable heirship of Bertie's problematical son should be so easily mollified, amused her daughter. She let the conversation go on while she worked quietly, thinking her own thoughts. Lucy did not, perhaps, find the idea of remaining unmarried as

attractive as her father did. She smiled at that too in her secret thoughts. Who is there that does not smile at it, being young? Why should there be anyone in the world who was not happy—who did not have all that the imagination desires, love and honour, and all the brightnesses and sympathy which love can give? Lucy had a private world to retire into at odd moments, a world so peopled that her fancy could not receive the idea of a lonely life. While her mother and Bertie talked, she had opened her secret door and gone in, entering into that vague sweet blessedness of dreams which is more than any vulgar reality of happiness. She heard their conversation, but it did not touch her. Her head was bent down a little over that work at which she was seldom so industrious, and even the smile was concealed that floated about her lips —that smile which was not for her family, much as she loved them. Lady Curtis had tried her best to lift the curtain, to look into that secret world of which she suspected the existence, but which she

had no clue to, no thread to guide her through; but it did not occur to her to think of this at the moment when her daughter had escaped into it from her very side.

"So Bertie is coming," said Sir John. "Why, Bertie? Yes, to be sure, he is a relation, and has a claim; but I see no reason why you should ask him so often. It looks as if you meant to throw him in Lucy's way."

"He will never be anything to Lucy," said Lady Curtis, smiling.

"That is all very well; but how do you know? Girls are not like anything else. They may hate a man one week and accept him the next. I've lived long enough to see that."

"You think they like to begin with a little aversion, as Mrs. Malaprop says—"

"Eh? I don't know anything about Mrs. Malaprop. I speak from my own observation. I would not put him in Lucy's way."

"No one would be less likely to attract Lucy's attention. Why, Bertie! he is no more equal to Lucy—"

"As if that mattered," said Sir John, with quiet contempt. "What do they care? You've had one example; you ought to know better; and you will have another before you know where you are. You are injudicious, I must say. You don't mind whom you introduce Lucy to, my lady; and if it is not one it will be another," he said, winding up hurriedly as Lucy came in. The parents both looked at her with that tender admiration which is, perhaps, of all admiration the most exquisite. They were not easily pleased in respect to Lucy. Her dress, her ornaments, her appearance were all surveyed with fastidious eyes; and from her shiny hair to the tip of her little satin shoe, these two difficult people could bear no imperfection in this lamp of their life. Sir John's inspection was not so minute or so intelligent as his wife's; he could not tell what she had on, or whether there was technical perfection in her toilette; but he was very critical about the general effect. As for Lady Curtis, she went into all the details; and they were both satisfied; it

was no small thing to say. There was a little cluster of white narcissus in her hair, which her mother liked, but at which Sir John shook his head. "Is that for Bertie?" he said jealously, in his mind. Girls were strange creatures; they liked to be admired whether they cared for the man who admired them or not; and no doubt she would fall a victim to one of my lady's *protégés*, if not to Bertie. This thought it was, along with disapprobation of the flowers, as something added to her toilette for Bertie's sake, which made Sir John shake his head.

"The Rolts were to have been here to-day," said Lady Curtis; "but I hear Mrs. John caught cold at the Seymours', and Julia has gone to nurse her."

"Julia is always nursing somebody," said Sir John.

Julia was Mrs. Rolt, the wife of the agent, who was a humble relation of the Curtises; and Mrs. John Rolt was the wife of his brother, the lawyer at Oakenden, who had the affairs of the county in his hands.

"She will have heard everything about the marriage. As soon as she comes back she will rush up here, wet or dry, to tell us what the bridesmaids had on, and all about the breakfast; it is a long time," said Lady Curtis with a sigh, "since there have been such grand doings in the county; not since Arthur came of age."

"I am glad to hear that Arthur gets on so well in Vienna," said the Rector, addressing himself to his uncle; "that is better than the Seymours' junketings. I hope he'll make a mark in diplomacy. He ought with his abilities."

"Ah, yes," said Sir John; "as for making a mark, that's another thing. It's very well for the present; but a country gentleman's place is at home in his own county. It's all very well now."

"Well, Sir," said the Rector, "some of us have no chance beyond the county, or even the parish; but when a man has a chance he ought to take advantage of it."

"There's nothing better than the county," said Sir John, "and the parish for a clergyman. What would you have?

You can't do more than your duty wherever you may be. I hope Arthur will stick to his, and then I shan't complain. If he had been at it sooner it would have been better for us all."

"Lewis Durant has been hearing a great deal about him," said Lady Curtis; "everything that is most satisfactory. Lewis is not much in society, I suppose, his work would not permit it; but he hears everything at the club. That is where you men get all your news. I hear all sorts of things from him; and he knows the kind of news that is most acceptable here."

"There is a great deal in that," said the Rector. "Some men make quite a business of it. It helps a man on wonderfully; but if Durant is rising in his profession, as you were saying, he can't have much time for his club. Son of old Durant, the saddler, isn't he? How odd that such men should be in clubs at all."

Bertie Curtis knew exactly what he was doing; he was not cowed by the look of indignant wonder which met him from Lady Curtis's eyes, nor the less open gleam

of scorn and defiance which came from under Lucy's drooped eyelids. It was Sir John the Rector meant to work upon, not the ladies, whom he knew to be partizans of his rival. Nobody had ever hinted that Durant was his rival, or that Sir John was nervous on the subject; but there are some things which reveal themselves without the aid of words.

"Not the son, the grandson," said Sir John. "Old Durant is dead long ago, and left a very good fortune; but they've run through a great part of it, I fear. That is the worst of fortunes made in trade; they go as fast as they come. As for young Durant, I wish half the young men in the clubs were half as good fellows. But he is not the kind of man, one must allow, whom you would expect to see familiar in our houses."

"What kind of men do you like to see familiar in your house?" said Lady Curtis. "Empty-headed nobodies? Lewis will always make his way. He has friends that are more worth having than we are. He goes everywhere."

"Does he, indeed?" said the Rector; "and his profession, what becomes of his profession? His father—or grandfather, was it?—would not have approved of that; but lawyers, though everybody says they are so hardworking, have a great deal of leisure, I think. How different a clergyman is, now—"

"Cousin Bertie, were you not at Epsom or somewhere the other day?" said Lucy, whose indignation was almost beyond words.

"Yes; I went down with Gerald, who has to be amused, poor fellow; but I did not think anyone knew," the Rector said, hastily; at which Sir John, though perhaps it was not quite polite, shook his head.

"The turf is all very well," he said. "It suits some men well enough; but a clergyman should not get the name of it, Bertie. I don't like it for a clergyman."

"Nor I, Sir; you are perfectly right, as you always are. I may have liked horses too much in my younger days—not wisely, but too well, perhaps—we all have

some weakness; but I hope since I took orders there has been nothing to object to," said the Rector, looking his astonished uncle full in the face, with mild defiance. And what could Sir John say thus boldly encountered? "Poor Gerald is a wretched invalid," he continued, "sick of everything. I never saw such a *blasé* washed out being. He has had too much of what people call life, and he's tired enough of it all. They think at home that his health depends upon keeping him amused—that's why I went," said Bertie, with all the innocence imaginable. "We've all got to amuse him, and you might just as well try to amuse this table. He is bored to death with everything. But then, he always was my father's favourite, and he can do no wrong."

There was a pause, for this Gerald, the eldest son, who was bored with everything, and in bad health, and possessed every attribute disliked by Sir John, was, failing Arthur, the heir presumptive of Oakley; and this passed through the minds of all the party, bringing a pang of un-

happiness with it, as the Rector knew it would do.

"Is he likely to marry I wonder?" said Sir John.

"That is the only foolish thing he has omitted to do. It is far from being a foolish thing with most people; but with him, worn out in body and mind, old before his time—and without a penny, why should he marry?"

"I am not so sure of that," said Sir John, with a sigh; and then he broke out hastily with an exclamation and question, in which a stranger would have seen little coherence. "Lord, what a strange world it is! How many boys are there of the Seymours?" he said.

That was the bitterest thought to them. Young Seymour to marry somebody so very suitable, and failing him, if he had not married, half-a-dozen boys to succeed! whereas Arthur had put himself out of court, and made all succession in the direct line impossible; and there were only Anthony's sons to follow. Anthony's sons! the thought was gall and wormwood

to them both. Gerald, a worn out young *roué*, and Bertie; one of them must come after Arthur, who had cut off himself, or at least cut off all following, all blessings of succession. And such a suitable marriage as young Seymour had made! What wonder if it went to their hearts.

"I've seen Durant at Epsom too," said the Rector, forgetting, for the moment, his own line of self-defence; "he's very much about, I think; here and there, and wherever one goes. Men of his class lay themselves out to please; they have more motive, I suppose, than men of more assured position."

"Mr. Durant," said Lady Curtis, hotly, "lays himself out, if you like the expression, Bertie, to be of use to his friends. He has got from his Maker one of the kindest hearts that ever beat, and consequently he is welcome wherever he is known."

"There is justice though in what Bertie says," said Sir John, coming up with his heavy forces to conclude the argument.

"A young fellow like that may be very friendly, but you can't take his friendship for nothing, my lady; and what would you ladies say who make so much of him, if the tradesman's grandson asked for one of your daughters? That would open your eyes."

Sir John felt that he had made a great *coup* when he said this, and he was glad of the opportunity of saying it; but nevertheless he was a little afraid of the consequences.

"Take another glass of wine," he said, hurriedly, pushing the decanter towards his nephew. "You'll excuse me not sitting long to-night, for I've something to do."

This cut short any indignant remonstrance that might have been on Lady Curtis's lips. She and Lucy took the hint and went away; but they did not say anything to each other, as they certainly would have done had anyone but Durant been in question. To tell the truth, the great curiosity in Lady Curtis's curious and lively mind was on this subject of Durant. What did Lucy think of him? What did he think of Lucy? But as neither one nor the other

had spoken to her on the subject, how could she interfere? She stole many a look at her daughter as they went to their tranquil occupations together. Perhaps Lucy's eyes were heavier than usual, less ready to meet her mother's; but she said not a word on the subject; and from Lady Curtis's side, after that utterance of her husband's, what was there to say?

CHAPTER III.

THUS time went on at Oakley as elsewhere with little happening, long lulls coming after the moments of active living which tell for so much in individual history, yet usually occupy so little space in it. Arthur was as much away from them as if he had been at Underhayes—more in one way, for he was now swallowed up in public life, embarked upon that bigger sea of business or pleasure which absorbs all individual interests. They did not hear much more of him than when he was absorbed by his bride, and yet how different it was. Though Arthur was less happy, though he was further off, yet he was restored to his family. They spoke of him freely to each other and to strangers.

There was no longer any cloud upon him; he was in his natural position. It was true that the friends of the family would turn to each other and ask in a whisper, "Do you ever hear anything of his wife—what has become of his wife?" after the conversation about him, how he was liking his new appointment, and all about it, which was carried on openly. "What has been done with *her?*" the friends said; "or was it really a marriage after all?" Many people came expressly to put these questions to Mrs. Rolt, who, being a distant relative as well as the agent's wife, naturally knew all about the family affairs. Cousin Julia was very prudent, all the more prudent that she knew nothing about the matter, no more than the questioners themselves. But about Arthur everybody talked openly now, inquiring how he liked Vienna, which was a great relief from the time when the country neighbours did not know how to manage, whether to remain silent about him altogether, which was the safest way, or to frame careful questions which could not compromise them. It was

very lucky that all this was now at an end; but still nobody knew much of Arthur, and except that one rapid visit, he was never seen at home.

Arthur himself, it need not be said, had a great many convulsions to go through. Probably he had not expected that Nancy would acquiesce calmly in the arrangements made for her. He knew her pride, and he knew also the relentings of tenderness that were in the girl; and in his heart he believed that she would have scorned the money he had left for her, would repudiate the settlement altogether —which would have made a return necessary upon all their steps—and might, indeed, put out all calculations by rushing back into his arms suddenly, without rhyme or reason, and making an end of these miserable bargainings. The hope of this kept him up, though he would not acknowledge it even to himself. She might come, even, in her impetuosity, to Oakley—he could believe this possible, unlikely though it was—but at least to his lodgings in town, where he lingered, making prepara-

tions, and thinking that every sound outside his room meant the arrival of his penitent wife. But Nancy did nothing of the kind, as has been seen. She accepted the income, and settled down and took no notice of him. Was it possible that it had all been calculation from beginning to end, and that she had never loved him at all? He never said anything of this, never betrayed his expectation nor his disappointment, unless it might be to Durant, who knew his thoughts before they got into words, and who also on his part had expected better things of Nancy; for, naturally, neither of them knew how her practical father had cowed her, and how all her tempers and impetuosities had been quenched by the dull and vulgar obstacle of his determination not to have his daughter back upon his hands without a fit provision. Thus it was for the first time they did her absolute wrong in their thoughts. When Arthur, having finally given up all those delusions which at first had been so consolatory, but which now in their failure were so bitter, left England,

the severance was real and complete. His mind was now at last turned violently away from the object of his love. Passion can be borne, that passion which impels a hasty spirit to foolish actions unintended in cooler moments; and even change can be forgiven; but who could forgive the bitter wrong of having been chosen from the first for interested motives, of having been the mere representative of wealth and advancement to the woman who had accepted his love? Was she never true at all, never tender, never touched by the flame of love which had burned in Arthur's breast? This was the one intolerable thought; and when silence followed all these agitations, and Nancy accepted without a word what he could do for her, and left him without a word, to endure as he best might, taking mere vulgar comfort from his hands, instead of all that he had been willing to bestow, the poor young fellow's heart closed with a pang against her. How much had she cost him! but she would not permit him to cost her anything. She would give up nothing to him,

or for him. What could it have been all along that she cared for? Not him, but what he had to bestow; and all that had been said on this subject came back to Arthur's mind—the discussions beforehand, which made it apparent that Nancy had hoped to be my lady very soon; and her complaints after, that she was so little the better of the fine marriage she had made. These were trifles, but such trifles as turn honey itself into gall, and make all evils ten times worse. He was in very low spirits when he left England. When Durant spoke of his return, he shook his head.

"It is much more likely that I will never come back," he said, "Why should I come back? I shall be out of everybody's way there."

"Arthur, you know there is nobody who wants you out of the way."

"I don't know it; I know the reverse. I shall be out of *her* way. She will be left in quiet. If I came here, I might not be able to put up with it, Durant. And how can they look at me at home without think-

ing what a mess I have made of everything? My poor father! I believe he feels it most of all—all the more for having so little to say."

"Come, come! Sir John will not break his heart."

"You don't know him," said Arthur, glad of a reason which would justify the desolate misery in his own. "Poor old governor! he feels it more than my mother does. She will storm at you, or mock at you, or cry over you, and get it out. But he says nothing; and the disappointment in me, the failure of me! I shouldn't wonder if they broke his heart."

Arthur's eyes grew red while he spoke. He was young enough to feel the tears in their fountains; but, poor boy! while he spoke of Sir John, it was Nancy of whom he thought. He loved her, and she thought nothing, except allowances and comforts, of him. She would allow him to pay her money, to share his income with her; but not to share his heart with her, and all his thoughts. These she did not want. Poor Arthur! if that would

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have done him any good, he would have laid down his head and wept. But as it was, he had to shake back indignantly into the depths all emotions which required stormy utterance. He could be sorry for his father, but he must not be sorry for himself.

And this was how he went away. An attaché of a foreign Legation is not supposed to be the most hardworking of men. Yet there are things which they may do when it is a matter of preference for them to be occupied; and Arthur went into society, almost vehemently, not caring to remember himself and his position. Perhaps he did not pass through the furnace entirely unscathed. He thrust Nancy's image out of his heart, and shut the door on her, and pretended not to be conscious of the efforts that image made to get back. Not Nancy—Nancy herself made no attempt one way or another, no overture; but her image, her recollection, that reflection of her which had occupied him when she was gone, kept persistently upon the threshold of the temple whence she

had been expelled. Perhaps he was not always faithful to her, but sought after new impressions, new sensations as a man may be excused for doing to whom the shrine of his heart has already been defiled; but he never got beyond the feeling that she was there—his rightful queen, and what was more his actual possessor, whatever he might think, or others might think. Meanwhile he lived a gay and busy life. He talked and danced, and, no doubt, flirted; for though he had made his position known, there were plenty of people in society to whom his position was quite indifferent; and Nancy, had she seen her husband, who was so devoted to her, in those early days of separation, would, no doubt, have had occasions for heavy enough thoughts on her part. But all the same, her image was never farther off than outside the door—artificially closed and bolted by curious devices, but of itself ever ready to open—of Arthur's heart.

All this, however, makes an effect upon a man; and when Durant wrote to him, after the interval of those two years, that

the parents were dead, and that Nancy had left Underhayes, it made a great commotion in his mind, no doubt, but it did not rouse him to instant action. His first thought, indeed, was to rush home himself, and come to her help in her trouble; but this was only a first thought. Why should he go, said a soberer impulse? Had she not rejected him, driven him from her, refused to be touched by any argument he could offer; and why should he humble himself to seek her again without any indication that he would be more successful this time? No, no, he would not risk a repetition of it all. Repetitions are always to be avoided. If any lingering feeling for him had been in her mind, would not she have had him informed of this new state of circumstances which might have modified affairs between them? But she had said nothing, she had taken no notice of his existence at this moment of trouble, when her heart, no doubt, must have been touched. He wrote to Durant to inquire into the circumstances, and to let him know how Nancy was. But he did nothing more.

As for Durant, his heart perhaps was softer, and he wondered at Arthur's indifference; or, perhaps, it was only that he himself had not been the offended and slighted person; and no one, however warm a friend, can feel our grievances as we ourselves do. Durant had not himself been particularly happy during these two years. He had worked hard and made progress in his profession, but he had not made very wonderful progress. His father, who had spent his fortune when he had one, had shown no disinclination to go on spending when he had none; and all that Lewis got by his labours did not seem too much to keep the paternal house going. Whosoever will work and support other people who don't, has to work and be eaten up in this world. It is a common enough fate; and with Durant, as with so many others, the miserable meaness of those who sucked his blood and mind, always wanting more, was a heavier affliction than the loss of his hard earnings which he took with greater philosophy. "For what good were they to

himself," he said somewhat bitterly. Lucy was as far, nay farther, from him than ever. He had not been asked to Oakley at all during the last year, and though he still saw the ladies of the family now and then, Sir John's disapproval had been too distinct to make it possible to disregard it, so that everything was at a standstill in this respect. Lucy understood him, he believed; but what would it serve him to be secretly understood if he could go no further, if years like this were to float away before he could approach her openly; before he could break through the obstacles on all sides, and venture to present himself with his suit openly? Indeed, for the last year Durant had almost come to acquiesce in his banishment, to feel that it was better for him not to see her, not to vex her with a sight of his faithfulness. Rather that she should forget all about it, not linger, as he did, on the verge of despair, but be happy whether he was happy or not. He had come this length when Arthur commissioned him to make those inquiries at

Underhayes, and it may be supposed with how many thoughts, with what suppressed impatience of these two, who were thus voluntarily wrecking their happiness, and destroying everything that was best in life to each other, this martyr to social prejudice and other people's sins trod over again the road he had gone with Lucy, along those streets which he had hurried through to witness Arthur's marriage. Had it been Lucy and he, who had pledged their faith that winter morning, what sweet years of righteous toil, softened and made joyful by love and sympathy, might his have been! while the other two, who had taken the matter into their own hands, defiant of duty, had wrecked themselves thus, and parted as lightly and easily as they had come together. But for his father's folly, Durant might have had that to offer to the object of his faithful affection, which even Sir John could not despise, and but for her brother's folly, Lucy would have been free to accept, or refuse, that honest offering. He did not know that she would have accepted it—but there had been

moments in which his hopes had risen almost to certainty—only to be cast down again into more miserable depths. Thus the two to whom honour and duty ranked highest were kept apart, and might be kept apart all their lives—while the two who thought but little of either (was not this hard upon Arthur?) played with the happiness they had snatched in defiance of duty, and threw it away. Durant may be pardoned, all things considered, for these hard thoughts; for, modest as he was, hope had been high in his breast when he conducted Lucy to her brother's wedding, But gradually, bit by bit, that hope had ebbed away. He had thought of winning her family's favour by his devotion to their service. He had thought that their familiar friendship with him might have balanced the humbleness of his birth—he had once thought his money, now lost, might tell for something. But all had worked against him instead of for him; while Arthur who had got the happiness he wanted, the desire of his heart, had thrown it away. These thoughts

filled his mind as he walked through the streets of Underhayes. He went to the little house in which the Bates' had lived, from which it seemed impossible to believe that the flavour of the early dinners and the evening rum and water could have faded away. When lovely things are carried hence by death, the vacancy is less strange almost, less poignant than when that tragi-comic strain of grim amusement comes in, and we feel that things so earthy, things having no affinity with a higher sphere, have come under its sublimating touch. Could anything have made the tax-collector's evening potations approach solemnity? and yet there was a kind of awe in the recollection of all those vulgar circumstances gone with the vulgar being to whom they belonged into the darkness—into the unknown which is not vulgar. Death is more akin to the noble and beautiful than it is to the paltry and commonplace. It is not unnatural that those should die and be translated into the sphere to which their finer impulses belong; but *these*, what have they to do

with dying, with heaven and hell and the unseen? This was what Durant felt as he looked with a kind of strange pity into the room, now occupied by a young mother with her little children.

"All messages is to go to Raisins the grocer," she said, opening the familiar door. It seemed to Durant impossible that Arthur was not there seated with Nancy upon the old haircloth sofa, within; but he met the haircloth sofa a little further on, standing out in the damp at a broker's door; and Arthur and Nancy, where were they? never, it would seem, likely to sit together again.

"Oh la, Mr. Durant!" said Sarah Jane. She blushed, and gave a glance at her husband in his white apron, and felt a burning pang that she had not married a gentleman. "Won't you step upstairs, Sir—do step upstairs;" she cried. She was glad that the customers in the shop, and even her husband, should see how intimate she was with a gentlemanlike-looking person, such as Durant undeniably was. And she told him all about the

accident that had carried off papa, and mother's inability to survive him. She was in all the freshness of her mourning, and shed a few natural tears, notwithstanding the pleasure she had in exhibiting her drawing-room to one of Arthur's friends. "You would have thought she didn't take much notice of him; but he had a deal more in him than people thought, Mr. Durant, and she couldn't live without him. She lingered just seven weeks. I can't say that she ever held up her head again."

"And your sister has gone away?"

"Oh, yes, my sister has gone away. Mamma wasn't one to say very much, but I say it's as touching an instance of conjugal affection—like what they put in the newspapers; and I tell Mr. Raisins, I'm sure I hope I'll do as much for him when our time comes," said Sarah Jane, half laughing, half crying. "The doctor couldn't say what it was."

"And—Nancy?"

"You might be more civil, Mr. Durant. My sister isn't one to be spoken of as if

she was a housemaid; but I forgot—you were always such a friend of Arthur Curtis. I see his name sometimes in the papers. La, the difference marriage makes! I never used to look at the papers, but now I read them regular every morning; and I see Arthur's name sometimes."

"Yes," said Durant, "and your sister, Mrs. Raisins—where has your sister gone?"

"Oh, it has been a trying time!" said Sarah Jane. "Charley went first, and I'm sure if it's all true about New Zealand, I wonder we don't all go; and then papa died, and then mamma, and now there's Nancy."

"But she has not died—or gone to New Zealand?"

"I never said she had, Mr. Durant. I was saying it was a trying time, one thing coming on the back of another. I'm thankful Mr. Raisins and me were married before it all began, for if we hadn't been there's no telling what might have happened. I couldn't have been married in my mourning."

"Has Mrs. Arthur Curtis removed far off? It would be very kind to give me an answer."

"Oh la! how can I tell?" cried Sarah Jane. "She's as self-willed as the old gentleman himself. Nothing stops her when she's made up her mind. There's no telling where she may get to, before she's done."

"She is travelling then? She may perhaps go to Vienna? Is that what you mean?"

"I couldn't say what I mean—I don't mean anything particular. You never can, when it's Nancy. She may go here or she may go there, and nobody can tell."

"But you must know something—you must have an address for her letters."

"Bless you, she never has any letters; who would write to her? She always paid her way, I must say that for her—and what letters could she have? She never was one for writing letters herself, so I don't expect to hear; and as for writing, if I don't hear, I never would think of doing such a thing."

"But you must know something of her," said Durant, alarmed. "You cannot have lost sight of your sister."

"Such things have happened," said Sarah Jane, with a certain pleasure in his discomfiture. "When you're married you've other things to think of than just your own family. I've got my house now and my husband; he don't ask me to do anything in the business, not a thing; but I like to be serviceable when I can, though I'm glad to say I've no need, Mr. Durant. We're doing very well, and I've got my nice drawing-room, all my own, and paid for, and my servants, and my front door to walk out of, as nice as any lady's in the land."

"I am very glad you are so well off; but there is something I wish to communicate to your sister."

"Oh, you shan't communicate with her through me; I have had enough of that; how foolish of Arthur, Mr. Durant, to make such a fuss! and Nancy too. They never could get on together. I don't say it was her fault or it was his fault, but they never got on."

"Then you will not tell me where she is?" said Durant.

"Oh, I never said anything one way or another," said Sarah Jane; but he could not get any other reply from her, and left Underhayes as little informed as when he came. One other fact he ascertained, however, from Arthur's banker, who informed him formally that Nancy's allowance had been returned by the country banker to whom they were in the habit of remitting it, with the intimation that it would be received no longer, Mrs. Arthur Curtis having left the place without giving any address. Thus Nancy made the first use of her liberty. She disappeared, leaving no trace of which they could get hold, and the place that had known her, already knew her no more.

CHAPTER IV.

IT was about a month after this, in the early autumn, when Lucy Curtis, coming down from the Hall upon one of her courses of visitation in the village, went, as she often did, to Cousin Julia to report herself as she passed, and inquire if there were any special troubles requiring her aid in the little community. Mrs. Rolt was not herself so active as her young cousin; but she heard of everything that was wanted, and was the universal medium of communication between the village and the Hall. The poor people came to her if she did not go to them, and her poor neighbours had unbounded reliance upon her kindness, liking her all the better perhaps that she never made any investigations

into their cleanliness or providence, and did not trouble them with visits, but was sorry, indiscriminately, for everybody who was in trouble, and for everybody who was sick had port-wine to bestow and beef-tea. It was not entirely indolence, but rather a just knowledge of herself, combined with a love of keeping at home, which intercepted "parish work" on her part. "I know I should gossip," she said, with looks of humility, when it was suggested to her that she should visit the poor; and there could be no doubt that she availed herself even of the lessened opportunities presented to her in this particular when the poor visited her. She was lying in wait for Lucy on this particular morning, which happened to be one of the days on which the young lady was expected in the village. Lucy had a great deal of business to do which is not reckoned in the management of an estate. She had the villagers to look after, which probably ought to have been the Rector's business. But as the Rector did not take naturally to that portion of his work, it was she who did it.

She had her little private savings-bank, her small provident societies, her clothing clubs, her parish library, all in her own management, with various additions to the formal educational processes of the place; classes for big girls and boys, and a private little school of cookery, and many small matters, all intended to make the people of Oakley happy; which object, perhaps, they did not succeed in fulfilling, but yet did infinitesimal scraps of good, such as is the utmost most human schemes attain to. One of these undertakings required her presence to-day. It was an October day; the leaves falling, the sky red; and the time was nearly three years from Arthur's marriage. It was cold enough to make that warm jacket quite expedient which she had hesitated to put on; and as Lucy approached Mrs. Rolt's house, Mrs. Rolt stationed herself at the window, ready to tap as she passed, and secure ten minutes' —conversation Cousin Julia called it, but gossip would be the proper word to say.

The house of the Rolts was a large substantial building of brick, very much like

the Rectory, but not with the same imposing grounds; a house of Queen Anne's time, with a pediment, and rows of twinkling windows flush with the wall. There was an excellent garden behind, but in front nothing save one large very white doorstep between the door and the street; and the windows of the dining-room, where Mrs. Rolt sat in the morning, were so close upon the road that no one could escape her whom she chose to arrest in this way.

"I am coming," said Lucy, nodding as she passed; and the neat housemaid, already on the alert, rushed to open the door.

"Missis has been looking for you all the morning," Sally said. There was evidently something more than ordinary to say.

Nothing could be more warm and cosy than the Rolts' dining-room. Its warm red curtains filled all the intervals between the windows, not, it is to be feared, as the canons of art would approve, at the present day, but with a comfortable fullness. The room itself was panelled, however, which would have redeemed it, notwithstanding

that the old mantelshelf had been tampered with, and was not so high up as it ought to have been. There was a big table in the centre of the room, and two easy-chairs by the fire. The newspaper thrown down in one of them showed that Mr. Rolt himself had but lately left this comfortable room. A big old mahogany sideboard, not handsome, but substantial, stood against the end wall, and a long row of low book-cases opposite the windows. There was not much room to move about because of the big table, upon which there was nothing decorative except a huge basin of China-asters, the last of the garden; but the room was warm, and very handy, Mrs. Rolt thought, when she had anything to do. The good soul never had anything to do; but what did that matter? She liked to have her big basket of odds and ends brought down and placed upon the table, where there was plenty of room; and there she would occupy herself very pleasantly looking out skeins of wool which might make a pair of socks for a poor child, and bits of cloth which would answer

for some one's patchwork. These last were very useful whenever a bundle of children happened to come to Oakley. More dolls than tongue could reckon had been dressed out of Mrs. Rolt's odds and ends; but they did not do so much good to the poor children who were in want of socks. Mrs. Rolt met Lucy at the door, and kissed her, and brought her in to the big chair.

"How-are-you-and-how-is-your-mamma-and-everybody?" she said in a breath, linking all the words together in her eagerness to get over preliminaries. "Will-you have-a-cup-of-chocolate-after-your-walk? No? Then-sit-down-and-I-will-tell-you-something," said Cousin Julia, out of breath.

"I knew you must have something to tell me when I saw your face. What is it? You don't look as if anything very bad had happened."

"Oh, it is nothing very bad. I don't suppose it is of much consequence, and yet it is very funny, you know. Lucy, two ladies have come to live in the little Wren

Cottage. Did you ever hear of such a thing? two ladies, one of them tall and handsome. My old Sam has quite lost his heart; and the other not so pretty, and much commoner looking, and both complete strangers, nobody knowing about them, or where they came from, or whom they belong to; and quite young. Did you ever hear anything so strange?"

"Two ladies in the Wren Cottage! Yes, that is news," said Lucy, with much composure. "I hope they will turn out pleasant neighbours; it will be very agreeable for you."

"Won't it? But it is not that, so much that I am thinking of. Who can they be, you know, Lucy? to choose a place like this to settle in, where there is no attraction, no society, no inducement whatever?"

"There is you, and Bertie at the Rectory; that is not bad; and it is very pretty, you know," said Lucy. "I don't wonder that anyone should choose Oakley. Where could you find so pretty a place?"

"That is all very well, my dear," said Mrs. Rolt, who, not having been brought

up in Oakley, was less enthusiastic; "but how did they find out that it was a pretty place? No one has ever seen them here before. They could not find it out by instinct, you know, could they? To be sure, Wren Cottage has been advertised in the paper and is let for almost nothing at all. That might tempt them, perhaps, if they are poor."

"Very likely indeed, I should think; and they must be poor, or else they would never come to Oakley. Is not that what you are thinking? I am glad you are going to have neighbours."

"Going, Lucy! My love, they are there. Look—look out of the furthest window; don't you see somebody's back in the bedroom doing something? Look as plain as possible between the white curtains. Somebody's back, and I do believe an ear!"

"I could not swear to the ear," said Lucy, laughing; "but I see there is something; and there is Fanny Blunt at the door, charing; that is good," she continued, warming into interest. "Fanny

Blunt is a good little girl. I am glad she has a place."

"Listen, Lucy. I told you there were two of them. They don't look like sisters, but Fanny says they are sisters."

"Oh, Cousin Julia! you have been asking Fanny—"

"Only her mother, only her mother, dear. *Of course*, I would not for the world question the girl about her mistresses. You could not think I would be guilty of such a thing, Lucy; but her mother tells me they are two sisters. You would scarcely believe it. The little one is a nice common-looking person; but the other, the one who was at the window, and you saw her ear—"

"But I could not swear to the ear."

"Don't laugh, dear. I assure you I am quite serious, and very, *very* much interested. Their name is Arthur, and one of them is married; at least it is Mrs. Arthur that has taken the cottage. Of course, if the other is her sister, she can scarcely be Arthur too."

"Mrs. Arthur!" said Lucy, startled.

"Do you know the name, Lucy? Do you know anyone of the name? I should like, I must say, to find out some clue."

Lucy shook her head. She did not know anyone of the name, which is, of course, a respectable surname borne by many people. It could have nothing to do with anyone she knew.

"I know it only as a Christian name," said Lucy.

"Ah, as a Christian name—everybody knows it as that," said Mrs. Rolt. "Poor dear Arthur, I think of him every day, poor fellow."

"He seems to be happy enough, Cousin Julia; we need not call him poor fellow now."

"No; but then it is uncomfortable, you know, to be like that, separated from his wife. To be sure, if they did not get on it was better, perhaps; but what a pity, Lucy, they did not get on! There must be great faults, I always say, on the woman's side."

"On both sides, I should think," said Lucy with a sigh.

"On the woman's side chiefly, my dear; for we know we ought to give in. We may always be quite sure we ought to give in, whatever our husbands may do; and in that case things generally come right; for you know one person cannot quarrel by himself, can he? there must always be two. But that has nothing to do with the poor lady opposite."

"Is she a poor lady? You seem to know more about her than you said at first."

"Well, Fanny — or, rather, Fanny's mother—she comes, you know, about her rent; poor thing, she is always behind with her rent; and she says she is either a widow or her husband is away. He may be a sailor, you know, or in India, or something of that sort; and she does not seem to expect him home. It is a sad position for a young woman. I am not quite sure which of them is Mrs. Arthur though; the little dumpy one is certainly the oldest, but then the tall one looks the most superior."

"Perhaps it is not always the superior

who is the married one," said Lucy, again tempted to laugh; for such guesses throw gleams of reflection upon the hearers, and lead young women unconsciously to think of themselves.

"No, indeed; I was thirty-five myself before I married, Lucy. It would not become me to speak as if the best people were always the ones that married soonest. There is yourself; but then you are so hard to please. But it stands to reason in this case, don't you think, that the married one should be the chief? for it is her house, you know, and she is the mistress. Now the tall one, whom you saw at the window, is evidently the principal; therefore she must be Mrs. Arthur. The little fat one seems a good little thing. She looks after everything, and helps to cook the dinner. The other—I wonder if she is a widow?—does very little about the house. I see her reading generally."

"You speak as if they had been the objects of your observation for years."

"No, not for years, of course; but when you live opposite to people for a fortnight,

you find out a great deal about them. You know you have been away, Lucy. She reads a great deal, and I have seen her out sketching, and sometimes she talks to the poor people; but she looks shy and frightened. Whenever she sees me she hurries away."

"And you have not called? I wonder you did not call when you take so much interest in her," said Lucy, taking up her little basket again, and preparing to go.

"Do you think I ought to call?" cried Cousin Julia eagerly. "I have been turning it over and over in my own mind. I wonder if I ought to call, I have been saying to Sam. What would your mamma think, I wonder? You see, they have no introductions, no one to be, as it were, responsible for them; and they might be something very different, they might be not at all nice people for anything we can tell."

"How unkind of you to imagine evil! Why shouldn't they be nice people? I am afraid you are beginning to be hard-hearted," said Lucy, laughing. "Mamma

will be very much surprised to hear that you have not called, I am sure."

"Do you really think so? I am *dying* to call," cried Mrs. Rolt. "Hard-hearted —me! Oh, Lucy, how can you say so? When you know it is chiefly on your account that your mamma may always be quite certain you will meet no one whom you ought not to meet here."

"I should like to meet her very much," said Lucy, offering her pretty cheek for Cousin Julia's kiss. "I shall come back for some luncheon if you will have me, and then you can tell me all the rest. My people will be waiting now."

Mrs. Rolt stood at the window and looked after her admiringly as she went away. Such a young creature—to do so much—and to keep the parish together. But then the good woman reflected that she had now said this of Lucy for some years, and counting back, decided that she must be twenty-three—not so very young to be still unmarried, for Sir John Curtis's daughter, who might marry anybody. "I wonder if there is *some one*,"

said Cousin Julia to herself, making a private review in her own mind of all the gentlemen she knew—which took her thoughts off the new-comer in Wren Cottage, though she might already be seen at the window gazing out with a certain eagerness, and showing more than one ear.

Lucy went on her way with a little tremble of excitement about her, though she laughed at herself for this absurd fancy of hers about Mrs. Arthur. Why should she think of her brother's wife? She was not aware that Nancy had left Underhayes, or that anything had happened to the family; and it was too foolish to suppose that the unknown sister-in-law who had left her husband and her duty rather than abandon her family would have thrown them aside again aimlessly to come here. Why should she come here? She had shown no symptom of any desire to make herself acquainted with Arthur's home; but rather had defied and rejected everything that could connect her with it. And now, after all was over between them, why should

she come now? Arthur was a quite well-known surname, as Mrs. Rolt said; and she rebuked herself for the fantastic idea with some vehemence. She went about her business, however, with a mind a little discomposed, feeling she knew not how, as if some new chapter had begun; and half expecting the new-comer to rise up in her path, and interfere with her. But Lucy's business went on as usual without disturbance from any one. She held her usual business levée, receiving the little savings of the poor women, the scrapings of pennies and threepennies they could put aside for the children's frocks at Christmas, and heard all their stories of boys who were doing well, and boys who were doing ill, and girls that wanted "placing," and those that were going to learn the dress-making, or away to Oakenden to service. Many a domestic tale she had to hear and sympathise with, and had to make several promises to "speak to" unruly sons and husbands. The village women had a great confidence in "somebody speaking to" those care-

less fellows, who would go with their wages to the public-house instead of taking them home. "It ain't that he's got a bad heart—but oh, Miss Lucy, he do want talking to!" they would say; and Lucy would request that the offending husband might be sent up to the Hall on some little commission, or inveigled in the afternoon into the school-room. "But he's got that sharp, he won't go nigh the school-room now as he knows as you're there, and what's a-coming," one of these plaintive wives said shaking her head. "Then you must say I want to speak to him," said Lucy, "don't make any pretence of business, but just say I want to see him up at the House. I will give him a little job to do for me if he behaves himself rightly," said Lucy. She had not, perhaps, so much faith in "talking to" as they had; but it was, at the worst, a flattering delusion, and the men themselves did not dislike the importance of the "talking to" which elevated them for the moment, though it was an undesirable elevation. She had come among

them since she was a child. She had waged war with the public-house since it was half a joke to hear her small denunciations, and both women and men had laughed and cried at Miss Lucy. "Lord bless her! she do speak up bold," they had said; and this early interference had given her a certain power such as the roughest ploughman will allow, holding his breath, to the child, who in baby rectitude and indignation may sometimes lecture a drunken father. She had done a great deal of business in this way before she went back to take luncheon with Cousin Julia, which was not one of the least of her kind offices. You would have supposed Lucy was the most dainty of epicures to see the little feasts Mrs. Rolt made for her on these parish days. Her husband was seldom at home at that hour, and Cousin Julia was ready to feed on nightingale's tongues, had they been procurable, the young Lady Bountiful who saved her from a solitary meal. And in the afternoon there were the schools to visit, and the little Cottage Hospital, and

the cookery, and all that was going on for the good of her village subjects. Bertie, too, had a way of coming to Mrs. Rolt's on these parish days, and though she was not fond of him, she avowed, as she was of Lucy, yet Bertie was a cousin too, and it was not possible for the gentle soul to forbear from a little feeble essay at matchmaking when she saw these handsome young people together. Bertie was not good enough for Lucy, but Lucy might like him for all that. Things much more unlikely had been known; while it was probable, indeed, that he, only a clergyman, and humble-minded (perhaps) was afraid to venture to open his mind to Sir John's daughter. Mrs. Rolt felt that it was only doing as she would be done by—or rather as she would have been done by—to allow them to meet when they could. It was the Curtises who were her relations, not my Lady; and she had a little natural opposition in her mind to Lucy's mother, who was understood to have little admiration for the Rector. "I hope you will not mind, my love, but

poor Bertie is coming to lunch," she said, in deprecating tones on this particular "parish day."

"Why do you say poor Bertie? I don't think he considers himself poor," said Lucy, half annoyed.

"Ah, my dear, he does not get everything he wishes for any more than the rest of us in this world," Cousin Julia replied; and to such a very natural and likely fact what could anyone say?

CHAPTER V.

BERTIE came to luncheon; and he had things his own way with Cousin Julia, much more than he ever had at the Hall—especially when Mr. Rolt was absent, Mr. Hubert Curtis was permitted to lay down the law. On ordinary occasions he was in the habit of saying that all these shows of interference with the public-house were a piece of womanish nonsense, and did no good, and that the public-house had its place in society, as well as any other institution. But Lucy, being known to entertain strong opinions on this point, the Rector modified his views, or at least the expression of them, when she was present. Sometimes, however, his indiscreet speeches during his absence

were brought home to him, even by Cousin Julia's misdirected zeal and desire to show him at his cleverest.

"Tell Lucy what you were saying about interfering with the people's liberty," she said. "I thought it was very clever, Bertie. I should like Lucy to know your way of thinking." At this Lucy pricked up her ears, and prepared for battle.

"It was nothing," said the Rector, confused, and giving his simple patroness a murderous look. "Lucy knows that I don't go so far as she does in using the influence which our position gives us."

"Is it about the 'Curtis Arms'?" said Lucy. "I know I would take away the license to-morrow, if I was papa."

"But, my dearest, your papa must know best. Bertie can tell you a great deal better than I can; but he says it is a pity to force the people even to do what is good."

"Perhaps," said Lucy, tossing back her small head and preparing for the contest. "But I should risk it. Let me force them to do right, if you call it forcing, and let Bertie leave them to take their own

way—and just see at the end of six months which would be the most satisfactory. If Bertie," said the young parish potentate relapsing into calm, and with a certainty which had some gentle scorn in it, "had worked in the parish as long as I have done—"

"One would think that had been a hundred years," said the Rector, "and I yield to Lucy's experience, Cousin Julia. Besides, nothing that I should do, as you very well know, would interfere with Lucy. To us the legal means of maintaining order, is by keeping up authority without interfering with freedom; but let her interfere with freedom as much as she pleases. Don't I know that there is not a man in the parish who does not like to be bullied by Miss Lucy?—not one that I know of," said the Rector with a little gentle emphasis. He meant to infer that he too was ready to be bullied, with that granting of all feminine eccentricities of influence, which is the gentlemanly way of letting women know that they have no real right to interfere.

"I did not think I bullied anyone," said Lucy, reddening. Perhaps she deserved this for her implied superiority over the Rector in knowledge of the parish. But Mrs. Rolt here saw the mistake she had made, and rushed to the rescue.

"Dear, no. Bertie never thought so, my love. He is always saying what an influence you have, and always so beautifully employed. You must never live anywhere but in the country, Lucy. You could not have your poor people in a town, and you would miss them dreadfully. It gives one so many things to think of. And, Bertie, talking of things to think of, tell us about our new neighbours. You were talking to them yesterday, I heard from Fanny's mother. And Lucy is like myself, she is dying to know."

"You mean the ladies at the Wren Cottage? Yes, I saw them yesterday," said Bertie; but he showed no disposition to say more.

"Tell Lucy about them. She has not seen them. And which is Mrs. Arthur—the tall one, or the little one? and is she

a widow? and if she is not a widow, is her husband coming, or where is he? and what put it into her head to come to Oakley? Lucy is quite interested from what I told her; and she wants to know—"

"You must wait till I have mastered your questions before I can reply. Is it the tall one or the little one who is Mrs. Arthur? the tall one, I think. Is she a widow? I can't tell. She wears an odd sort of dress."

"It is more like a Sister's dress than a widow's. I know she wears a peculiar dress, Bertie. You need not tell me that. But you have talked to her—"

"Could I ask her if she was a widow? and if not, when her husband was coming, and why she came to Oakley? I can't interrogate new parishioners like that; and only a lady can find out such things. I don't know anything about them," said the Rector hastily. Evidently he had no wish to talk of them; and Lucy, looking at him keenly, set down this reluctance as a proof that he knew more than he said. This however was not at all the case. The

Rector did not choose to speak of the new-comers, because he felt more interest in them than it was perhaps quite right to feel. He admired "the tall one" very much, and would have been rather glad to make sure that she was a widow. But, on the other hand, he did not want Lucy to suspect this, or to take the idea into her head that Mrs. Arthur was the object of his admiration. Was not Lucy herself his chief object? And if he could win her, it would be of very little importance about Mrs. Arthur. But in the meantime there seemed very little appearance of winning her, and Mrs. Arthur was interesting, and he had no desire to betray to Lucy that he found her so. In this, of course, the Rector was very foolish, for if there had been any chance of awaking Lucy to pique or jealousy, nothing could have been more to his advantage than that he should allow her to perceive his interest in the new inhabitants; but few men are wise enough for this, and Bertie, to his credit, be it said, had in such matters no wisdom at all.

He owed it, however, to the impression

made upon her mind by his reticence, that he could tell more about these strangers if he would, that Lucy almost invited his attendance on part of her way home.

"I will walk with you as far as our paths lie together," she said, as she met him at the door of her cookery school; and he turned with her, well content, though he had not intended to walk that way. Was Lucy coming round to a sense of his excellencies? he asked himself. It seemed "just like" one of the usual aggravating ways of Providence, that this should come, just as he began to feel a new interest stealing into his mind.

"Our paths lie together, as far as you will permit," he said, tempering however the largeness of this speech by a prudent limit. "I should like nothing better than to walk up the avenue with you this beautiful afternoon."

"Oh no, don't take that trouble;" said Lucy. She wanted to question him, but she did not want so much of him as that; while on the other hand, he, though conscious of the rising of a new interest, would

on no account have done anything to spoil his chance with Lucy, had she shown the slightest appearance of turning favourable eyes on him. Whatever divergencies of sentiment there might be, Bertie knew well, without any foolishness, which was the right thing to do.

"How good of you to take so much pains with all these children," he said. "Will they be really the better for it, I wonder? The cooking looked very nice; but will their fathers' dinners be the better?"

"Their fathers are prejudiced—and perhaps their mothers too. It is their husbands and their mistresses who will be the better. We must always consent to lose a generation," said Lucy, with youthful prudence. And he smiled. It was, perhaps, scarcely possible not to smile.

"Then if my uncle agreed with you," he said, "and the rest of us—the girls who are learning to broil and stew in your schools would make nice dinners for the boys, who never would have been allowed to have a glass of beer in the 'Curtis

Arms,' and then the old generation once swept away, all would go well."

"Why not?" said Lucy; "but I do not wish to touch the old generation, if not for good, certainly not for evil. I would not sweep them away, but I don't hope to do much with them. Even the like of you and me," she said, with meaning, "though we are not old yet, are too old to take up with a new order of things. But, Cousin Bertie, it was something else I meant to say to you. I am not in a flutter of curiosity, like poor dear old Julia; but—you know something more about these ladies, I could see, than what you told us, at least."

"These ladies! what ladies?" he cried, a little confused by the question.

"The new people—at Wren Cottage; Mrs.—Arthur, I think you call her."

"Oh!" he said, then made a little pause again, confirming all Lucy's suspicions, "indeed I don't know anything about them, more than I told you; why should I? I don't suppose there is anything to know—and if there is why should I conceal it from you?"

But in his tone and in his look, there was such a distinct intention of holding back something that Lucy was more certain of it than ever.

"Yes," she said, "why should you—from me? I felt there was something; if there is a mystery about them, surely, Bertie, I am the best person to confide it to. I think I have a right to know."

What could she mean? did she mean that there being a secret understanding between them, any "new interest" on his part ought to be confided to her? The Rector was profoundly puzzled. He had never said anything to Lucy, nor Lucy to him, to warrant such a pretension as this.

"Of course," he said, faltering, "you know that you are the first person I would confide in—if there was anything to confide. The idea that you care to know is too sweet to me, Lucy."

She looked him full in the face; asking in her turn, what did he mean? sweet to him, why should it be sweet to him? What was there in her question to give

him this flattered yet confused look? She regarded him very gravely with inquiring steady eyes.

"I think you must fail to understand my question," she said. "And of course I can't help being anxious. Tell me; there can be no possible reason," she added, with some impatience, "why you should not tell *me!*"

But there was something so comical in the perplexity which succeeded that expression of happy vanity in his face, that Lucy laughed out.

"I don't believe, after all, you have anything to tell," she said.

"Not I—not a scrap of anything; what could I have to tell? what could they be to me? I have eyes only for one," said the Rector, still somewhat confused, and taking rather awkward advantage of the opportunity. They were just then approaching the gate, and Lucy gave her head that little toss of impatience which he was acquainted with, perceiving, with some anger, her mistake.

"Here we are at the end of our joint

road," she said, abruptly; "thank you for carrying my basket so far, Bertie. Oh no, I prefer to carry it myself. I cannot indeed let you take any further trouble. Good morning. Papa expects you to-morrow, I believe."

"But that need not hinder me from coming now."

"Oh no, not at all, if you have any object in coming; but papa will be out, and you must not take any more trouble for me—Good-bye!" she said, abruptly, waving her hand to him. He had nothing to do but to acquiesce. He turned back, feeling that he had not come off well in the encounter—what did she mean? She was a troublesome squire's daughter as ever young Rector was plagued with. She knew the parish better than he did, and took her own way in it, indifferent to his advice. She would not be guided, directed, nor made to see that he was the first person to be considered. And she would not be made love to—nor even receive compliments—much less consent that to settle down along with him in the Rectory,

bringing with her all that Sir John could keep back from rebellious Arthur, was the natural arrangement. And, this being the case, if a "new interest" did enter his mind, why in the name of everything that was mysterious should she have a right to know it, and be the natural person to confide it to? He was more mystified and puzzled than words could say.

As for Lucy, she went on with a little tingling in her cheeks, feeling that she had made a mistake, but not clear as to what the mistake was. Could he think that it mattered to her whether he had eyes for one or half-a-dozen? what were his eyes to her? But still though she did not see how what he said could bear upon the subject, there was certainly a little confusion about Bertie; he knew something about Mrs. Arthur, if not what she, with so much excitement, permitted herself to suspect. It was a lovely October evening, with a sunset coming on which blazed behind the woods. The sunset is, perhaps, the one only scenic representation of which we are never tired. Lucy went on looking at

it, lost in the beauty of it, as if she had never seen one before. There was a deep band of crimson round the lower horizon, all broken as it was with masses of trees, and rosy clouds flung about to all the airts stained into every gradation of red, till the colour melted in an ethereal blush upon the blue. And between the crimson below, and the rose tints above, how the very sky itself changed into magical tones of green, and faint lights of yellow, far too visionary to be called by such vulgar names. She went on slowly, her face turned towards it, and illuminated by the light. "Beginning to sink in the light he loves on a bed of daffodil sky," she was saying to herself. At such moments there are thoughts which will intrude even into the peacefullest soul, thoughts of some one absent—of something lost—if there should happen to be anything lost or absent in our lives: and even with those who are altogether happy, a sweet pretence at unhappiness will invade the heart; the hour which turns the traveller's desire homeward that day when he has bidden sweet

friends farewell. All this was in Lucy's head, and in her heart, and she forgot what she had been so curious about only a few minutes before.

A path struck from the avenue across the Park, not much beyond the gate. Some sound of crackling twigs under passing footsteps disturbed her with the moisture, scarcely to be called tears, standing in her eyes. She half turned her head, and saw two figures against the light, one taller, the other shorter—figures unknown to her who knew everybody. Without intending it, Lucy made a half pause of suspicion, which looked almost like a question—though that was quite unintended too, for it was a thoroughfare, and she had neither the wish nor the right to interfere with anyone who might be there. The strangers had long wreaths of the wild clematis flowered out, with its great downy seedpods, and some clusters of scarlet and yellow leaves in their hands. They made a little alarmed pause too, and there was a kind of stumbling retreat backwards, and a momentary consultation. Lucy went on, but in a

moment more, paused again, at the sound of some one pattering after her over the carpet of fallen leaves.

"Oh! if you please—"

Lucy turned round. It was a comely young woman who stood before her, in mourning, a little flush upon her face, her breath coming quick with the running. She was little and plump, a kind, good-tempered, homely little person, with good sense in her face.

"I hope we are not trespassing. I hope if we were trespassing you will forgive us, please, for we did not mean it. We are strangers here. All this is rubbish," she said, looking down upon the leaves in her hands; "not even flowers. We thought it was no harm to pick them; they took my sister's fancy, they were so bright-coloured. I hope we have done nothing wrong."

The English was good enough, the h's faint, yet not markedly absent; but the voice was not the voice of a lady; this Lucy divined at once.

"The road is free to everyone," she

said; "you are not trespassing; and you are quite welcome to the leaves. They are beautiful; you have very good taste to like them—but of course they are of no use."

"Oh, they are of no use;" said the little woman, "it is my sister. She draws them sometimes. Indeed she paints them quite nicely, as like as possible. She takes such great pains."

"Is she an artist?" said Lucy. It seemed necessary to say something, for the stranger with her good-humoured face stood still expecting a reply.

"Oh, no; she does not require to do anything. She does it for her pleasure. She has a great deal of education—now." This was said with a look of some alarm behind her. Lucy turned and looked too; the other taller figure in sombre black garments had already reached the gate.

"It must be you who have come to the Wren Cottage," she said; "everyone is known and talked about in a village; is it you that are Mrs. Arthur, or the other lady? I will come and see you, if you will allow me, on my next parish day."

"O-oh!" the plump young woman gave a startled cry. "My sister is not seeing anybody." Then her countenance recovered a little, and she said, "But I shall be glad—very glad to see you. Of course if she wishes to shut herself up, she can go upstairs."

"I should not like to intrude upon anyone," said Lucy, with a smile. She was a princess in her own kingdom, and no one could affront her. The idea indeed amused rather than offended her, that *she* could be supposed to intrude upon anyone in Oakley. The notion was delightfully absurd.

"Not intrude—oh, dear no, not intrude; but she has had a deal of trouble," said the stranger, "a great deal of trouble; if she could be persuaded to see—anyone, it would do her good."

"I will come," said Lucy, with a friendly nod. She did not require to stand upon any ceremony with this homely little person; "and in the meantime the road across the Park is quite free. Good day," she said, smiling. All other fancies flew away out of her mind at the sight of this

rational common-place little person. She was not vulgar, certainly not vulgar, for there was no pretension in her; but certainly not in the least like ——. Lucy had seen the Bateses, the family of Arthur's wife; she had seen Sarah Jane in her cheap finery, and the mother in her big bonnet and shawl. Nothing could be more unlike them than this sensible little person in her plain neat mourning dress. She had seen them but for a few minutes, it is true; but the recollection of florid beauty, of flowers and ribbons, and flimsy fine dresses, and boisterous manners of the free and easy kind was strong upon her; and this little woman was quite sensible and simple. What fantastic notions people take into their heads! there was evidently no mystery or difficulty here, she said to herself smiling, as nodding again to the new-comer, she resumed her walk at a quicker pace, and made her way henceforth undisturbed to the Hall.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHY did you speak to her? why didn't you just make our excuses and come on?" said the younger to the elder. "I thought you would never be done talking."

"I wanted to see her; I wanted to make out what kind of girl she was; and I will tell you this, she is a nice girl. No more stuck up than I am. A nice, smiling, pleasant girl, not a bit proud; not half nor a quarter so proud as you are, Nancy."

"*H-hush!* Don't call me by that name. Can't you understand that is the only name they know? Call me Anna, and it will not matter; they would never think of that in connection with me."

"Why should they think anything about

you?" said Matilda. "A young lady like Miss Curtis, why should she trouble her head with new people coming into the village? Or what would make her think of you? You know the reason why you came here, because it was the very last place Arthur would think of looking for you; though, indeed, he has not troubled you much with looking for you," she added in a lower voice.

"You are very unfeeling," said Nancy, with a quiver on her lip.

For it would be in vain to attempt to delude the reader into the idea that this tall young lady in mourning who had taken the Wren Cottage, and was called Mrs. Arthur, was anybody but Nancy. Her disguise was transparent, indeed, to anyone whose suspicions had ever been awakened, and the very transparence of her disguise was part of the character of the girl, who had suffered a great deal indeed, and learned something, but who was still herself at bottom, notwithstanding the progress she had made. She had made a great deal of progress. She had read

numbers of very heavy, very solid books, and could have passed an examination on various abstruse subjects which never could be of the slightest service to her. How was the poor girl to know? She was aware that reading books was the way to be educated, and she was too proud to be guided by anybody who knew better than she did. She had devoured a great deal of poetry, and many novels as well; though these she was rather ashamed of. But she knew that it must be right to work through the Encyclopædia, and to read history, and Locke upon the Human Understanding, and other volumes of solid reputation. No doubt they did her good, more or less, and the very effort to read them did her good. And she knew now all about those things which had puzzled her so much at Paris; about the Queen who was murdered, and the people whose heads were cut off; and had gone over all the collections of pictures open in London, and knew now, at least, the names of the painters with whom people are generally enraptured. Her mistakes in the old days thus gave her a

certain enlightenment, revealing to her certain points on which she was very ignorant, and which it was right to know; but beyond these limits Nancy had not much information as to what was wanted for the education of a lady, and stumbled along in the dark, though with the best will in the world. But the occupation which this gave her was of the utmost importance to her, and had softened and consolidated her whole moral being. Further, she had tried music, which comes into the most elementary conception of a lady's training, but had found this very hard work, neither her fingers nor her patience being equal to the strain upon them; but she had managed better with drawing, and had made a great many elaborate pencil copies, and some in chalk, which Matilda thought beautiful. When her father and mother both died, it was impossible to keep her longer in Underhayes. No one had any longer the smallest control over her. Matilda, though she was sensible, had never taken any lead in the family, and though she criticised, always obeyed the more potent impulse of

her younger sister. Nancy had been as impulsive and imprudent in her present action as in all the previous movements of her life. She had given up her income from Arthur without telling anyone, to the great dismay of her sisters. "What are you to live on?" they had both cried, with horror and alarm. But Nancy was not to be talked to then more than at other periods. She had informed them that she meant to live on her own little infinitesimal fortune, the two hundred and fifty pounds her aunt had left her; and in answer to all their representations that this would last a very short time, she would deign no reply. She had determined to do it, and that was enough—as she had determined to do other foolish things. Matilda had come with her in the spirit of a martyr. "We must do something to make our own living when she has spent it all," Matilda said; "and I won't forsake her." Thus Nancy carried out her foolish intention. She was independent for the moment, obliged to nobody, whatever might happen to-morrow or next year. Two hundred and fifty

pounds seems a large sum to the inexperienced. And as to the reason why she came to Oakley, it would have been still more difficult to tell that. Because it was the last place in the world where Arthur would be likely to find her, she said. Was it not rather because when Arthur came to find her (as she had no doubt he would as soon as he heard "what had happened,") she would not permit herself to be found at Underhayes, yet would not either put herself out of his way? However, Nancy did not herself know what she meant upon this point. A great many confused and inarticulate feelings were in her mind. Her heart yearned towards her husband, whom she had loved in her way. Only when she had driven him from her had she realized how much he was to her; and though far too proud to make any overtures of reconciliation, all her forlorn studies, her foolish self-trainings had been one long silent overture, had anybody known. And now to come to the neighbourhood of his home, to hear of him, to see the people whom she had stig-

matized so often as fine folks (how the educated Nancy blushed now at such a vulgar expression!) seemed the greatest attraction in the world to her. She would not put herself in the way of being noticed by them, but she would not, on the other hand, make any violent effort to keep out of their way; and there was something that pleased her fantastic condition of mind in the mere idea of living there, unknown, yet not too carefully concealed, indifferent as to whether she was found out or not; unrevealed, yet not disguised. She would not change her name. She was Mrs. Arthur, and there she would stay as Mrs. Arthur. If she were discovered she was harming no one. She had a right to live there if she pleased. Thus half in longing, half in defiance, Nancy took up her abode in the little cottage called, nobody knew why, the Wren Cottage, probably because it was not much bigger than a wren's nest. Perhaps it had not occurred to her how much discussion would be raised in the tranquil little village by her arrival as a stranger; perhaps she did not care

whether she was talked of or not. Indeed, she did not think on the subject, but only wondered with all her mind whether they would find her out, whether they would not find her out, what they would think of her? but never asked herself, as Matilda said, why they should think of her at all. This, it was to be feared, was not at all a thing desirable to Nancy. That they should inquire about her, wonder who she was, suspect her, recognize her, these were the things she preferred to imagine, and which it pleased her to brood over. Lucy had seen her, and very likely would recognize her. She was sure she would recognize Lucy wherever she might see her. It was exciting to meet her in the avenue as they approached, and Nancy had a secret pleasure in sending Matilda to apologize and explain, although she was quite well aware that the thoroughfare was a public one, and that nobody could interfere with their movements. Though she would not let Matilda see it, she was trembling with suppressed excitement when her sister rejoined her. Nothing could

happen in consequence of such a meeting; Lucy could not have divined who she was by the distant vision of her figure against the light, or through Matilda, whom she had never seen; but yet the wilful headstrong girl, who had resisted so much, trembled at this chance encounter. She went back to the Wren Cottage afterwards, excited and tingling all over; yet feeling a blankness in the air as if all the colour and expectation had passed away.

The Wren Cottage was very small. The door opened direct into the sitting-room without any passage or antechamber. Nancy of two years ago would have thought it very common, but Nancy of to-day, knowing a little about Art, in respect to modern dwelling-places, supposed it must be "quaint," and called it so. A wooden staircase led up into the bedrooms. There was a deep recessed window at the side which gave a little more pretension to the room, and commanded the road as far as the Hall gates, and some small portion of the avenue. Here Nancy had ranged her books in the

window sill. They were of a very heterogeneous description. There was a French book, something about the revolution, which she was reading "for practice," and there was a philosophical work which she read—because she thought that was the right thing to do; but a little of it went a long way. Thus the few volumes which she liked made an imperfect balance with a great many which she did not like, but worked at conscientiously, as understood to be the proper means for her purpose. Her present solid study was of the most heterodox character, and might have compromised Nancy's "soundness" in doctrine, had there been any critic here apt to judge; and might have confused her own brain, poor girl, had she paid any attention to it. But she used the book just as she used a chair —the one was to read, the other to sit down in; and Nancy did not trouble her mind about the one more than about the other. Besides these studies, there was a large cartoon in chalk hung up against the side of the window, which she was copying so carefully that it made one's fingers ache

to see. When she came in from her walk, however, Nancy put down her podded clematis, and all the autumnal leaves in her hands, upon the window sill, and arranged them somewhat mechanically, yet with a certain grace, upon a large sheet of paper, where she partly traced, partly drew them as they lay. This was her fancy—and she thought it very frivolous and childish; not at all a thing that had to do with the formation of the character, like the cartoon in chalk.

While Nancy settled her wreath to her satisfaction, Matilda made the tea. They had carpeted the little room with a common carpet all of one colour, ornamented with a narrow border. Among Nancy's books there had been some which treated this question, and she had given to it a solemnity of consideration which might have satisfied the most severe critic. The little table in the middle of the room had a cover to correspond; the stairs had the same red carpeting, and there were similar curtains at the broad lattice window looking out to the street. This was but an

elementary stage of decoration, but how important it seemed in Nancy's eyes! as important as Queen Marie Antoinette and the fact, which she had learned so painfully, that old pictures were generally considered better than new ones. She was ashamed of herself as she painted her leaves very rapidly, and with a blush on her face, thinking it mere childishness, and when she read a novel, or even a new poem. But to keep Matilda from placing the chairs against the walls, and to keep the same colour in all the accessories of the room, that was serious. It was one of her proofs that she was becoming a real lady, and was no longer ignorant, fond of everything new and gaudy, as she had been, alas! when Arthur was with her; everything was changed and mended now. The tea went rather against Nancy's notions of what she ought to be doing in her present state of self-culture. She ought to be preparing for dinner. But then there were practical considerations which told against theory here. Fanny, the little maid, came only in the morning and "late dinner," that distinguishing

feature in the life of "the gentry," would required cooking before it was eaten; and they both preferred tea; and it was much cheaper, and caused less trouble; and, lastly, no one visited them to see that they did not dine. Nancy was not indisposed to call the dinner luncheon that day the Rector had called.

As it was she sat down to her bread and butter with sufficient content. She had a great deal to do, and notwithstanding her precarious condition, separated from her husband, without an income, and living upon her little capital, she was not unhappy. She was too busy to be unhappy. She had been quite unfit to be Arthur's companion when they were together; and there was so much to do to qualify herself for that post. But when the Curtises saw that she could draw so well, and that her room was so artistic, and that she had read so many books, what could they think but that she was truly a lady? And Arthur would come home for her, and all would be well. These hopes were in her mind as she read, and as she drew.

She was occupied, and there was hope in her, and no one to cross her. Accordingly Nancy was not unhappy.

"I shouldn't wonder at all if Miss Curtis was to call—she said something about it. Will you see her, or will you not see her? I said I was not sure you would like it."

"Matilda, that was rude!"

"Nothing of the sort—what could I say? I couldn't tell her, Nancy don't want to be seen."

"Don't call me Nancy, please!"

"Well, Anna then—but I never can recollect. I said I didn't know if you would like it—but anyhow you could go upstairs if you didn't like it."

"She must think me a pretty bear. She did not ask you—what your sister's name was, nor where she came from, nor —anything about her?"

"Not a word. Why should she? You didn't show at all; when you are seen you are a deal more interesting than me, I don't deny it."

"Please!" said Nancy clasping her hands, "don't say 'a deal,' and 'more interesting than me.'"

"What should I say," said the good-humoured Matilda; "it is a good thing I am not nervous. When she comes, you can run upstairs. You can listen over the banisters, and hear all she is saying; and if you like her talk, you can come down next time. After all, Nancy, if you had not imagined that we would see them, why should we have come here?"

"But she will know me," said Nancy, "she saw me once—"

"On your wedding day! You don't think you are a bit like the same person in that funny stiff little cap, and white collar, as you were in your wedding dress with your veil? I don't think Arthur himself would know you," said her sister frankly. Nancy winced at this, in spite of herself. She did not want to be so changed as this. That she might be changed a little, that there might be a difficulty in recognising her, and a sense of mystery exciting their curiosity before they found her out—that would be nothing but pleasant; but to be so unlike herself as not to be recognised, even by Arthur, was not in her thoughts.

It was Matilda's part to put the tea away, as it had been hers to make it. There was no question between them of their different positions. Matilda yielded to Nancy all that the other could require. It was not hers, heaven forbid it, to read these big books, to think so much about everything, to take such trouble to learn drawing, and to understand the arrangements of a room. But she liked getting the tea, and putting the things away, though she was apt to make Nancy angry by setting the chairs straight against the wall. And then they sat at the table with the lamp between them, Matilda with her needlework, Nancy reading her French for practice. Perhaps in her heart the elder sister might be sighing for the friendliness of Underhayes, where she could steal out in the evening and go through the blazing gas in Raisins' shop, into the comfortable little parlour, to have a chat with Sarah Jane; but on the whole they were not at all unhappy; all the energies of Nancy's active mind were fixed upon her French. She could now, she thought, understand

very well all that was said to her, if ever she went to France again; and understand the plays, and know what everything was about. Thus she revolved in her narrow circle, preparing for those contingencies which had once happened, and still hopeful that they were the same which would happen again.

But Nancy was taking a little rest from her occupations, painting again her tangled wreath of autumn leaves, but rather disposed to throw something over it, perhaps one of those wretched antimacassars, which proved her (though she did not know it) to be still in the land of bondage—for even Matilda, who entertained a profound admiration for the chalk cartoon, considered the other rubbish—when next morning there came a soft knock to the front door. Matilda opened it so quickly that her sister had neither time to disappear nor even to conceal her occupation, when Mrs. Rolt's pleasant middle-aged face appeared at the door.

"I am Mrs. Rolt, a very near neighbour. May I come in and see Mrs. Arthur,

if she is at home?" said Cousin Julia. Her soft eyes were quite keen with curiosity. She glanced to the very background of the picture, the depth of the recess in which Nancy stood, with her pencils in her hand. Her figure looked taller than it was in the long clinging black gown; and the little close cap of transparent net on her head, looked like a piece of conventual costume; and she wore a jet cross at her neck, which increased this effect. Mrs. Rolt thought she was like the mysterious lady in a novel with an interesting secret. She looked at Nancy, though Matilda stood so much the nearest. "I don't even know which is Mrs. Arthur," she said, with one of her ingratiating smiles. Nancy came forward, laying down the pencils. She made a nondescript kind of salutation, half bow, half curtsey, to the stranger. It was awkward and shy, but it was not ungraceful. Matilda only smiled cordially, which answered the purpose quite as well, it must be allowed; but there was no likelihood that Matilda would ever be an

ambassador's wife, called upon by her duty to be solemnly civil to all the world. "I am so glad to make your acquaintance," said Mrs. Rolt; "I daresay you see me sometimes, as I see you. I have often and often looked across; and I should have called, but I was afraid you might think I was intruding. However, being told yesterday—that is Miss Curtis, whom you are sure to have heard of, told me that I ought to come; and I was very glad to hear her say so. Have you met any of the Curtises, Mrs. Arthur? They are, as of course you know, the chief people here."

"I have met—one of the family; long ago;" said Nancy, trembling as she said it. But she could not restrain herself, for she suddenly felt that she must hear of Arthur or die.

"Have you indeed? I wonder what one that would be. I should not wonder if it were Arthur—Arthur is the one that has been most in the world. And oh, such a sad fate for him, poor fellow! He married some common girl or other—I

don't mean to say anything against her character, you know; but she was not a lady. And after a while he had to separate from her. Such a sad business! and poor dear Arthur was the nicest boy, poor fellow! I suppose you must have met him in London. How interested poor dear Lady Curtis will be."

"Oh, don't say I met him!" cried Nancy, whose cheeks were burning. "It —might not be the same; it might be a mistake. Was he—not happy—with his wife?"

Matilda got behind Mrs. Rolt, and made a warning sign to her sister. Nancy's eyes were blazing, her face suffused with crimson. Any spectator less placid and unobservant would have fathomed her secret at once.

"Oh, poor fellow! he was dreadfully in love with her, I believe, as young men so often are when they marry out of their own station; but they separated, you know, so I suppose they can't have been happy. We expected them down here, and all sorts of preparations were

made, and dear Lady Curtis so much excited. And then all at once everything was countermanded, and poor Arthur came down by himself, looking very wretched, poor fellow! I wonder often if they will ever come together again. It seems such a pity—a young man with everything before him! But, of course, this puts a stop to his life; what can he do? cut off from everything! For people don't care to encourage in society an attractive young man like that who is married, and yet isn't married, as it were. Ah!" said Mrs. Rolt, drawing a long breath; "how I run on! As if you, who are strangers to the place, could be as interested about the Curtises as we are. It is very good of you to listen, I am sure."

CHAPTER VII.

NANCY'S agitation after this interview with Mrs. Rolt was great. It had never occurred to her before, to think of the feelings which might legitimately affect Arthur's family and friends in respect to her marriage. That they "looked down upon" her—despised her as a poor girl, sneered at her as not a lady, was comprehensible enough, and woke her to a wild defiance. It was this that roused the principle that she was "as good as they were" in her undisciplined bosom, and led to all the subsequent woes. But when she heard thus simply what was the state of feeling on the other side, and especially the lamentation over Arthur's spoiled life with which Mrs. Rolt had concluded,

Nancy's heart, which had been tremulously confident, began to sink. If this was how it was—and of course this must be how it was—could he forgive her for having by her perversity doomed him to such a fate? She had thought of him often jealously as "enjoying himself" in the unknown society of which she knew nothing; but it had never occurred to her that Arthur was in a false position in that society, a married man, yet not a married man; better off, no doubt, than a woman in the same position, yet but poorly off, all the same; looked upon doubtfully, not belonging to one class or another. Was this what she had sentenced him to? Had she been reasonable, had she come with him when Lady Curtis had made all those preparations for her reception, all this might have been avoided. It gave her a strange thrill to think that Lady Curtis, who was now so near her, had made preparations to receive her, and had even herself been agitated by the thought of meeting her son's wife.

"If I went now and told her, what

would she say?" Nancy asked herself. That would be entirely different. Arthur's wife formerly had a right to everything. Arthur's wife now, what had she a right to? nothing but the dislike and opposition of Arthur's family. She was a stranger to them—an enemy!

"If it takes effect on you like this, just to see one that knows them, even though she don't belong to them," said Matilda, "what will they do to you if they come themselves? and that young lady said she would come herself—and oh! hasn't she got quick eyes? she'll read you all through and through in a moment."

"Let me alone," said Nancy; "do you think I care who comes? I have more control over myself than you think."

"I'd like to see some more signs of it," it," said Matilda; "I thought you had mended of your silly ways; but here you are again, walking up and down and rampaging as bad as you were at home. If this is all to begin over again at the first mention of Arthur, whatever in all the world did you leave Arthur for?"

"Because I was mad, I think;" said Nancy.

"Well, that was always my opinion. Your husband, a nice well-dispositioned young man, that would have done anything to please you! and all for us at home, that were fond of you to be sure; but didn't want you very much, Nancy."

"You are cruel, very cruel, to tell me so;" cried Nancy, "to tell me now!"

"Well, now is the only time I could have told you," said Matilda, composedly. "I wouldn't have said it then to hurt your feelings; but you can't blame poor old father and mother now, and it is quite true. When a daughter has married and gone off with a husband, who wants her back again at home? But nobody would be unkind and hurt your feelings; and now you hear the same from the other side. When married folks are separated, what can anyone think but that there's something wrong? on one side or on the other side, it's all one. But between you there's nothing wrong, only your tempers—only your temper, Nancy, I should say, for

Arthur, I will say that for him, always stood a deal more than he ought to have stood, a deal more than I'd have stood in his place."

Nancy made no reply. She retreated into her recessed window, and put down her head into her hands among all the "rubbish" of autumn leaves which Matilda was so severe upon, and cried. It was all true. So long as her father and mother lived, there had been a kind of anchor to her wayward soul in the thought that Arthur and his family had slighted and condemned them, whom she was bound to defend and vindicate; and this gave a certain reason and excuse for her own conduct, which of itself did not bear any cooler examination. Her books, from which she had acquired such strange bits of heterogeneous information, had not guided her much in the way of thought; but to be at a distance from any exciting period of individual history is of itself sufficient to throw a cold gleam of uncomfortable light upon it, light which we would in most cases elude if we could. Nancy

had eluded it by impulsive action after the change which had compelled her to think, the two deaths which threw her, as it were, adrift upon the world. She had rushed at one thing and another, given up her allowance, resigned her villa, removed here, without leaving herself much time to consider; but now the retarded moment could be held off no longer, and she was obliged to think. There was not much that was satisfactory in the retrospect. Was it possible that they had not wanted her at home? and that she had spoiled Arthur's life as well as her own? For what? She could not tell. Because his family "looked down upon her," because he objected to live in Underhayes, because she was foolish, hot-headed, unreasonable. And now what prospect was there that the husband whom she had thus slighted, and his family whom she had defied and wounded through him, would be ready to forgive, to take her into favour? A temporary despair came over Nancy. The first time that an impetuous young mind sees its own faults, and thoroughly disapproves of itself, what a

moment that is! Reproof of others most generally brings with it an impulse of self-defence which defeats self-judgment; but when first, in the silence, unaccused of any one, the soul rises up and judges itself, what a pang is there in the always tardy conviction—too late, perhaps, late always, after suffering and making to suffer, distracted in the best cases with the desperate question whether there may still be a place of repentance. Matilda, sitting calmly at her needlework, had not the least idea what passionate despairings were in Nancy's mind as she sat there and cried. What was to become of her? The elder sister had been anxious enough over that question when Nancy was so foolish as to give up her allowance. Matilda herself had settled to join Charley in New Zealand, where useful young women like herself were, she knew, wanted, as men's wives, and in other domestic capacities; but she would not forsake her foolish sister—and now Matilda awaited with sufficient composure the solution of the question, what was to become of them? If, when their

transparent secret was found out, the Curtises showed themselves willing to take charge of Arthur's wife, Matilda intended to give her so very distinct a piece of her mind that there could no longer be any possibility of self-deception on the part of Nancy; and to lay before her then and there the option of return to her duties or immediate emigration; but, in the meantime, until this crisis arrived, the sensible Matilda could wait. She was working quietly at her own outfit for New Zealand at this very moment, while Nancy studied her books, or drew, or "played" with the "rubbish" which littered the room. Matilda, like most people, had a respect for education, and perhaps there might be good in all that; but while this fantastic, undirected preparation for something, she could not tell what, was going on with Nancy, Matilda made those matter-of-fact preparations which can never be without their use. She made her chemises for the voyage while the other tried to make herself "a lady." The one attempt might fail, but not the other; and thus she worked on

steadily, altogether unconscious of the wild surgings of despair and self-condemnation in Nancy's mind. Matilda did not know what these sentiments were. She herself had always done her duty, and as for Nancy, she had been very silly, and there was an end of it. If she persevered in being silly, Matilda had fully settled within herself that she would take the command of affairs, and bring the fantastic young woman to her senses, by giving her at least a piece of her mind.

Things went on in this way for a week or two after Mrs. Rolt's visit; nothing further occurred to disturb the sisters in their stillness, and Nancy at least required the stimulation of some new thing. She got into despair about her reading, her conscientious pursuit of knowledge and accomplishments. If things were always to go on as now, what was the good? Every day she got up hoping that something might happen, some encounter that would quicken the blood in her veins; but nothing happened. It was rainy weather, and not even a hairbreath escape of meeting Lucy,

or any chance of being recognized—that danger which she professed to fear and secretly longed for—had ever happened. The village life was very dull and still, and the sisters had no natural distractions, no breaks upon the heaviness and monotony of the rainy autumn days. To Matilda, indeed, it was occupation enough to get on steadily with her chemises, and she even rejoiced in the quiet which permitted her to "get so much done." But Nancy, even without the sense of uncertainty in her fate which made her restless, was not sufficiently placid of nature to have lived without break or change; and her whole scheme of living, artificial as it had been from the beginning, was disorganized and broken up. She had hoped everything at first, making a little romance of the story: how Arthur would come to seek her as soon as he knew of "what had happened;" how, failing to find her at Underhayes, he would rush everywhere to look for her, advertise for her, pursue her far and near; how he would come sadly home to tell his mother that his Nancy was lost for ever

and his heart broken; and then would find her, turning all trouble into joy. This was the fancy the foolish girl had cherished in her heart; but there was no sign or appearance that anything would come of it. On the contrary, she began to perceive something like the real state of affairs; she saw what she had brought upon her husband by her causeless abandonment of him, and something of the light in which her conduct must appear to others; and how could she be sure that he was now ready to pardon, ready to open his arms to her again? This thought disturbed all Nancy's confidence in her progress, in her reading, her French, her beautifully shaded *étude*. What folly these labours would all turn to if he despised them, and had no interest in her improvement! It could do her no good to be a lady unless she was reconciled to Arthur; and what if to be reconciled was no longer Arthur's desire?

Mrs. Rolt, however, for her part, was most agreeably moved and excited by the new neighbours, to whom her visit had brought excitement of so different a kind. She hurried out to the Hall to tell the

story, in her waterproof and goloshes. It was too wet for Lucy to venture to the village; but Cousin Julia could have ventured anywhere in the strength of such a piece of news as she had now to carry. She told how she had gone to call, chiefly moved by Lucy's encouragements.

"For I thought if Lucy thought it was the right thing to do, you must have thought so, dear Lady Curtis; and of course you know better than I do. There is something very strange about them. The married one is quite different from the other. I am sure she is a most accomplished person, very handsome. I should think she must be something very artistic, and perhaps she has been on the stage. Oh, no, she did not say anything to make me think that; but there is something about her;—very handsome, with such a lovely complexion, and fine eyes and hair. But the other is quite homely, a nice sort of little friendly woman. My own opinion, if you ask me," said Mrs. Rolt, mysteriously, "is that she's not a widow. *I* should say Mr. Arthur, whoever he may

be, is no better than he should be; and he has broken his poor wife's heart, and driven her away from him. That's my idea. Sam says 'Fudge!' but then he is always saying 'Fudge.' I wish I knew the rights of the story; and you will see, it will turn out something like what I say."

"On the stage—was the young woman on the stage? I hope she will not introduce any taste for that kind of thing in the village," said Sir John, who had come in as usual for his cup of tea.

"Oh, dear no—no, I did not mean that. She is only the kind of mysterious, lovely young creature—so superior, and yet with such a homely sister; and so handsome—and all alone, you know—that might have been on the stage, as you read in books; something quite romantic, and so interesting, like a novel," cried Mrs. Rolt.

"I hope it may come to the third volume and entertain us all," said Lady Curtis. "We want a little amusement this rainy weather. Perhaps the husband will turn up, and prove to be handsome and supe-

rior too: or perhaps she will hear of his death—what is the matter, Lucy? You have spilt your tea over my crewels!"

"No, I only scalded my fingers a little. I don't like to hear you settling all about the husband, as if we were quite sure he was the one to blame."

"Ah, well," said Lady Curtis, with a sigh. It brought another story to her mind, as no doubt it had done to Lucy's; and after this no more was said. To be sure, Mrs. Rolt said to herself, as she drove home in the brougham which Lady Curtis (always so kind!) insisted upon having out for her—it was not, perhaps, right to talk of anything that could recall poor Arthur's sad circumstances. But then this was evidently so different, such an interesting young creature; and dear Sir John had been quite amused.

The next bright day after this, Lady Curtis and her daughter were both in the village. After the first outburst of autumn rains, a bright day is very tempting; and the walk down the avenue was pleasant, and the village basked in the sunshine with

genuine enjoyment, as if the old red houses knew how expedient it was to make the most of the little warmth and brightness which remained possible. Lady Curtis sat at Cousin Julia's window while she waited for Lucy, and looked out, not without satisfaction, upon the village, tranquil as it was. To see the women at their doors, curtseying to the Rector as he passed, and the children getting out of his way, and the cart with baskets, conducted by two hoarse and strident tramps, which was at that moment making a triumphal progress through the street, was a change from the sodden green of the park, as seen from the long windows of the morning-room. She was a woman whom it was easy to amuse, and this simple variety pleased her. She was looking out with a smile on her face at this rural scene, when the sudden appearance of two unknown figures surprised her; and when Bertie stopped to speak to them with much appearance of cordiality and interest, Lady Curtis was interested.

"Who are these?" she asked, with the ready curiosity of a great county lady,

almost affronted that any new individual unknown to her should appear, as it were, in the very streets of her metropolis without her leave. "I never saw Bertie so eager before; he looks as if he had forgotten for the moment that he himself must be the first person to be thought of. Who is she, Julia?" cried Lady Curtis.

Mrs. Rolt came hastily from the other end of the room, where she had been making the tea.

"Oh, that is the mysterious stranger—that is Mrs. Arthur—that is the lovely creature I told you so much about. Don't you think she is very handsome—don't you think she is interesting? I am so glad you have seen her! Yes, Bertie is very civil to them. He is going back to their door with them; but they never ask him in. I must say there never was anything more prudent. They never encourage him to come; and though he is the Rector he is a young man, you know, and agreeable. I should certainly say Bertie was agreeable, if my opinion was of any weight."

"So that is your mysterious young woman?" said Lady Curtis. "No, Julia, no, she has never been on the stage. They never walk like that when they have been on the stage. She doesn't know how to walk; but there is a kind of gracefulness about her. I cannot say if she is handsome or not; but what can such a woman as that possibly want here?"

"That is just what I never could make out," said Cousin Julia, delighted to open forth on her favourite subject. Nancy just then turned round unconscious of the eyes bent upon her, to look at the cart with the baskets, and thus exposed herself unawares to the full gaze of her husband's mother. Her long black dress gave a certain dignity to her figure, calling attention by its very plainness, and so did the little close black bonnet with its edge of white which encircled her face. Nancy in her ordinary garb and ordinary moods never had looked half so distinguished or lovely. Lady Curtis could not take her eyes from this face so softly tinted, so purely fresh and severely framed.

"Why didn't you tell me before? The girl is a beauty!" she said.

"A beauty?" said Lucy, coming into the room; and she, too, gazed from behind her mother's shoulder. Had she ever seen that face before? she asked herself, with an anxiety which neither of the others divined. She had seen it only once, for a minute or two, surrounded by clouds of bridal white. Was it likely she could recognise it now in this almost conventual severity of costume? She dropped behind her mother, half-satisfied, half-disappointed, and paid no attention to the further comments of Lady Curtis, which delighted Mrs. Rolt. If it was no one she had ever seen before—what did it matter to Lucy who it was? But when the two ladies had left Cousin Julia, after they had taken a few steps on the way home, Lady Curtis came to a sudden pause.

"Don't you think, Lucy," she said, in a conciliatory tone, "that it would be only kind to call upon those new people? They must feel very strange in this quiet place; and as she really seems a lady—"

"I am quite willing to go, mamma;" said Lucy, feeling her heart beat more quickly in spite of herself.

"But don't you think it is only a duty?" said Lady Curtis. She wanted to be persuaded that she ought to go—not to go merely because she was curious, which was the real reason; but when Lucy returned no further answer, her mother, making use of her own impatience of temper as a reason for doing what she wanted, turned sharp round with a little show of annoyance at Lucy, and went straight across to the cottage door. Cousin Julia saw her, and almost clapped her hands with pleasure, as she lurked behind the curtains and watched; and the two people in the Wren Cottage, who had been watching also from their windows since they came in, saw her too, and prepared for the visit with excitement indescribable. Lady Curtis's movements were so rapid that she had knocked at the door, and Matilda had opened, before Nancy, who was standing behind, had got over her first breathless start of agitation and

suspicion. She was standing, leaning forward a little, her hands clasped, her lips apart and panting with excitement, when the visitors saw her first. Lady Curtis was in a little glow of pleasure and interest.

"I had heard of Mrs. Arthur as a new neighbour," she said; "I hope I may come in and pay my respects, though it is getting late."

"Oh, come in, come in, my lady;" cried Matilda, officiously hastening to place chairs for the great ladies. Matilda's heart was not leaping so in her breast that she thought it must escape altogether—but Nancy's was, as she felt herself suddenly in the presence of these two ladies, with whom her own fate was so closely connected. She held her heart with her hand, that it might not leap out of her throat, and made a gasp for breath, and could say nothing; and it was no wonder if Lady Curtis was flattered by the impression made by her visit, and thought she had never seen so expressive a face before.

"My sister will be very pleased to make

your ladyship's acquaintance," said Matilda. "What a fine day, and what a blessing after the wet! We were beginning to think it never would be fine again. Anna! don't you see my lady—and haven't you got a word to say?"

"It is very kind of Lady Curtis to come," said Nancy, with difficulty. She could not withdraw her eyes from the two. And Lucy looked at her from behind her mother with again a thrill of wonder and suspicion. Why was she so much agitated? what was there to be agitated about?

"I hope you like our village," said Lady Curtis; "very few people see it, except the people of the place, so it is not admired so much as it ought to be, we think. It is a pretty village; but I trust you may not find it very dull as the winter goes on."

"Oh, we do not look for much; we are used to living very quietly—"

"That is well," said Lady Curtis; "for Oakley is very quiet—so quiet in winter that I much fear you will be frightened. Any stranger passing by is an event. To-day

for instance, it was quite gay; a pedlar's cart, a most picturesque object—and when you two ladies appeared, whom I had not seen before, it became quite exciting. Hyde Park is seldom so full of novelty to me."

They both stared at her a little, not knowing what to say.

"The cart looked quite cheerful," said Matilda; "I thought just like your ladyship says. Some of the baskets were quite pretty, and it was nice to see it. But I could not persuade Na— my sister, to buy any," she concluded hurriedly. What a glance of fire shot at her from Nancy's eyes!

"We did not want them," she said; drawing a step nearer. She was too restless to sit down; her heart indeed beat more quietly, and her breathing was calmer; but to be here in the same room with them both, talking to them indifferently, as if she did not know them, as if she was not devoured with anxiety to conciliate them!—though a touch too much might have driven her on the other side to defy

them openly. For the first time, Nancy felt how little she could depend on herself. They might say something, they might even look something, that would offend her, and send her off at a tangent. She felt no strength in her to guide herself. At present, even, while there was neither offence nor *rapprochement*, how wild and breathless she was, how incapable of managing the situation! It must depend altogether on what they would do or say.

"You have resources, I see," said Lady Curtis, "Books secure one against everything. But—" she added, shutting one hastily, which she had opened on the table. "This is not common reading. Is it a girl-graduate in her golden hair that we have got among us without knowing." She smiled graciously as she spoke. And Nancy grew red, and grew pale, and sat down, though only because her limbs trembled under her.

"I know—very little," she said, humbly, scarcely able to command her voice.

"But she is not a girl at all," said Matilda. "She is a married woman,

though you would scarcely think it, my lady; and she is very fond of her book. Na— Anna, show her ladyship that beautiful drawing you are doing; that is what she thinks of most."

"The leaves? what a charming garland!" said Lady Curtis. The "rubbish" which Nancy had been amusing herself with, was fixed up against the wall with two pins. Nancy, herself, thought it was rather pretty, but nothing of course to the *étude* in chalks.

"Oh no, not that! that is all nonsense. It isn't fit for your ladyship to look at; but look here, my lady," said Matilda, proudly. Lady Curtis cast a careless glance at the drawing, which the sister thought so superior; then turned with much admiration to the wreath that hung against the wall.

"I must try to coax you," she said, "after a while, when you know us, to make some designs for me, for my crewels. How beautifully they would work! Look, Lucy!"

"They are very clever," said Lucy,

going up to look; the sisters could not believe their ears; and never, though Nancy had known the sweetness of girlish triumph, and had "had offers" before Arthur, and had tasted the sweetness of a young lover's adoration—never had gratified pride so touched her heart as at this moment; her face brightened out of its anxious awe and alarm.

"Do you really, really think that? that I could make designs—for you?"

Lady Curtis thought she understood it all; evidently they were poor, and this promised perhaps some occupation that would help their poor little ends to meet. "Indeed I do, really, really," she said, pleased with the simplicity of the words, "if you will be so very kind and take so much trouble. I will show you what I am working now when you come to see me at the Hall."

Nancy's head swam with a soft intoxication of pleasure. These kind looks, these kind words from this dreaded fine lady, who had been her bugbear—whom she hated in imagination, and credited

with every evil quality—overwhelmed her. And Lucy's presence gave a thrill of danger, half-alarming, half-delicious, to this strange ecstasy of feeling. If Lucy should have recognised her! She was saying something, she could scarcely tell what, about nothing she could do being good enough—when Lady Curtis, still looking, smiling, in her face, prostrated her with the innocent question:

"You have met my son—in society—Mrs Rolt thinks—"

Nancy started from her chair, unable to restrain herself. "Oh—no, no!" she said trembling—not, she was going to say, in society, but changed this by instinct rather than reason, "not—your son; I told her after that it was—a mistake; only some one of the name."

"Ah!" said Lady Curtis with a little sigh. "I am disappointed. I thought it had been my Arthur. Perhaps then it was one of my nephews, the General's boys? The Rector is one of them. My son has not been at home for more than two years—it is a long time not to see

him. I quite hoped," she added with flattering friendliness, "that it had been him you knew."

Again Nancy's head went round and round. Should not she throw herself at this lady's feet, who smiled on her so graciously, and tell all that Arthur was to her? The impulse was almost too strong to be resisted. While she stood on the eve of this rush, Lucy passing by to resume her seat after examining the drawing, gave her an inquiring, wondering, suspicious look. This brought Nancy down again to solid ground. She gave an alarmed, confused glance round, not daring to trust herself to speak.

"I am sure my sister would be glad if you would have the picture, my lady," said Matilda, "since you like it—though I'm sure I can't think why. It's all leaves that we got out of your park. Me and—Anna often walk there. It's a little wet at this time of the year; but it must be lovely in the summer—if we stay till then."

"I hope you will stay," said Lady Cur-

tis, rising, "you ought to see Oakley in full beauty; and I hope you will come and see Lucy and me," she added, holding out her hand. Nancy did not know what was happening to her when that soft hand pressed hers. "And if we can be of any use to you—as you are here alone—I hope you will tell me," Lady Curtis said.

"Well!" said Matilda when the door closed upon them, and she had watched their figures from the window. "Well, Nancy! what do you think of her now? A nicer lady, more civil, more pleasant, more friendly, I never wish to see; and that was what you made such a fuss about as if she was a monster and would eat you! I'd go down on my bended knees to Providence to give me a mother-in-law like that. Not a bit of pride—as if we had been the best ladies in the land. Oh, Nancy, Nancy! what a fool you have been! if poor dear mother only knew."

But Nancy was past standing up for herself, or making any reply. She had covered her face with her hands; her whole frame was tingling, her head swim-

ming, her heart full of trouble and pleasure, and confusion and despair. What a fool, what a fool she had been! that, indeed, if nothing else, was beyond measure true.

As for Lady Curtis, she was enchanted with her new acquaintance. "There is some mystery there," she said as they walked briskly away. "It is easy to see that the sister is of a very different class and breeding from that touching young creature with her blue eyes. Is she a sister at all, I wonder, or some old servant for a protection to her? I don't know when I have been so much interested," she said.

As for Lucy she said nothing; her mind was full of doubt and confusion. She did not know what to think, and there was nothing that she could trust herself to say.

CHAPTER VIII.

DURANT had not been at Oakley for more than a year. No invitation had come to him, though he still corresponded with Lady Curtis on the same confidential and affectionate terms as before; and his heart had grown sick with this pause of stagnation in his life. There are moments when that which we have borne with tolerable calm for years, becomes all at once intolerable to us; and this is especially the case with men who, having laboured hard and dutifully without much personal recompense, are suddenly moved by some accidental prick to see that their best years are floating away from them, without any of the delights that belong to that crown of existence. Why this feeling should have

come upon Durant after his late visit to Underhayes, and not on previous visits, when he had seen his friend Arthur, so much younger than himself, enjoying the happiness which it was not given to him to enjoy, it would be difficult to tell. Perhaps Arthur's happiness, while it lasted, was too full of drawbacks to attract his friend, to whom it never could have been possible to woo his love in Mrs. Bates' parlour, behind the backs of the family. But curiously enough, when the family was swept away, and all its shabbiness had become pathetic; and when Arthur's happiness had fallen into dust, and become apparently a thing beyond restoration or even hope, then, and only then, did it stimulate the dormant passion in Durant's veins. He said to himself that to lose the chance of happiness altogether by thus passively waiting till it should drop upon him from the clouds, was, perhaps, in the end a greater foolishness than even the mad folly which had ruined Arthur. Arthur, at all events, at the worst, had had his chance; whereas Lewis, so far as appearances went,

was never to have his chance, but only toil and toil on for the benefit of others till the capacity for joy was exhausted in him. In the grey autumnal weather, when the rains are falling, and the skies lowering, and all things settling down to "the dead of the year," does not sometimes a longing, insupportable, for sunshine and brightness, cross us—a longing which has to be satisfied by some lighting up of lamps and artificial processes of illumination, if not by the natural and blessed sun? Durant went on for a little, with his heart full of smouldering fire, reflecting upon his own loneliness amidst all the enjoyments and fellowships of the world, reflecting upon the manner in which his own hard earnings melted away, running into the bottomless pit of improvidence and unlovely waste in his father's house, with no real benefit even to the dwellers therein, much less to him whose labours had no lightening, whatever happened. At last the point of explosion was reached by the touch of a piece of good fortune. For the first time he was retained as first counsel

in an important case likely to attract some notice in the world, and at the same time was appointed one of a commission of investigation into certain legal evils then under the consideration of Parliament. The sudden pleasure of distinction among his peers, altogether apart from the profit of it, conveyed a swift and penetrating pleasure to his mind, and altogether overset the impatient patience which so many thoughts had already put in jeopardy. A little success often in such circumstances fires the mine which weariness and reflection and comparison have been filling with combustibles. Why should he drag on any longer dully, without even an attempt to brighten his own life? The man who blacked his shoes, secure of weekly remuneration, had just "thrown up his place," and risked his existence, in order to "better himself;" and why should not the master try to better himself too? This sudden impulse set him all on fire. What was the use of his self-denial, his renunciation of all pleasant things? They who would have them, must seize them, without all this

reckoning of possibilities and counting of cost. Durant was not superior to that almost fierce independence which, like all good that comes out of evil, has its false side. The dependence and incessant demands of his family had made him stern in his resolution to owe no man anything, to struggle out his own career unaided; and had also made him too proud to ask any favour in his own person, even a night's lodging from the friends whom he had served with all the humbleness of true generosity when occasion offered. He would have spent time, which was more valuable to him than money is to most people, or money, of which he did not possess too large a stock, in the service of the Curtises, whenever they called upon him; but he would not ask them to invite him, or even suggest that he would like to be invited. This was one of the *défauts de ses qualités*. So it took him a little trouble to get himself to Oakley in a roundabout way. He did this by means of a college friend, who had a living within a dozen miles, and to whom he had no

objection to offer himself for a short visit; and being there, what so natural as that he should drive over to Oakley for a few hours? He did this a few days after the visit of Lady Curtis to Nancy, and appeared suddenly in the morning, conscious and anxious, while the family were still at breakfast.

"I thought I'd run down and see Cavendish at Stainforth," he said, feeling the weakness of the excuse.

"Cavendish at Stainforth!" Lady Curtis echoed, turning pale. She saw through the pretence, but she did not see through the cause of it. If it was her son who immediately occurred to her mind, what mother will blame her? She ignored all motives of his own on Durant's part with pitiless, though unconscious cruelty; and left the table precipitately, her heart beating with sudden agitation. "Oh, Lewis, something has happened to Arthur; and you have come to break it to me!" she said, turning round upon him as he followed her into her morning-room.

"No," he said, with a sheepish air of

guilt, feeling himself absolutely wicked to have thus frightened her for ends of his own.

Lucy had lingered behind, and was following him when she heard this reply. She turned at once and went away. Her heart had beat even more wildly than her mother's at sight of him, but with less simplicity of feeling. Was it just that Arthur should always be the first thought? If it was not something which had happened to Arthur that brought Lewis here, then it was — something else. This conclusion, so very simple when put into these words, filled Lucy with involuntary excitement. When he said "No" to her mother's question, she turned and went away. Was he going to risk it then, to dare all the dangers of absolute separation? Lucy had not seen him for more than a year; but she knew what was in his heart. She had never doubted him; she had been faithful herself to the undisclosed hope, and so had he. She hurried away to her own room, while he, she knew it, went to try their fortune, to put it to the test, to lose or gain every-

thing. Lucy's heart beat so that she could not think. And would they be so hard, so cruel as to deny her her happiness, the father and mother who loved her so dearly? Most probably they would do so. She could not deceive herself. Most likely he would be sent away without hope, perhaps with disdain. A girl has a terrible moment to go through when she knows that her life, and the life of another still more dear to her, are thus being decided for her without any power of hers to interfere. If Lewis asked her for her love, she would tell him yes, she would give it, she had given it; but herself she could not give. She was free, you may say, of age, fully capable of choosing, and with no law, human or divine, to prevent her from settling, what was more important to her than to anyone, her own course and her own companion in life. All so true, yet so futile in its truth. Lucy was free; yet tied hand and foot, bound by innumerable gossamer threads of duty and affection, which she could not, and would not, if she could, attempt to break. It was no law

nor enacted disability, nothing that Parliament could touch, nor public opinion, nor emancipation of women; but nature, unrepealable, unchangeable, that bound her. She could not go to her usual occupations, she could not go downstairs. She sat trembling, scarcely able to think for the sound in her ears of commotion within her. She had to sit and wait while he made his venture; she knew there was nothing, for the moment, in her power.

"Not Arthur!" cried Lady Curtis. "Oh, forgive me, Lewis, that I always think of my own boy first. You are sure there is nothing that you want to tell me gently? I know your kind heart—not to frighten me?"

"I want to tell you something—about myself, Lady Curtis."

"Ah!" she cried in a tone of relief; and then with a perceptible ease and calm of indifference, "about yourself? I hope it is something very good, very delightful, something equal to your deserts. There is nothing I could be so happy to hear."

"Something of that to begin with," he

said, and told her of the advantages that had come to him; his appointment on the Commission, and his first important brief. Lady Curtis was delighted, as she had promised to be. She threw herself into the discussion of his prospects with enthusiasm.

"I am as glad as I could be of anything, except good fortune to Arthur," she said. "My dear Lewis, you who have been so good to us all! you come next. And now all the world is before you, and everything that is good. Thank God for it! though I never had any doubt on the subject," she said, smiling at him through tears of pleasure, as she held both his hands.

How cheering this was! sympathy could not be more warm, more cordial, more affectionate. It warmed his heart, and brought the tears to his own eyes.

"Yes," he said, "it is the beginning, I believe, and hope—. It is the opening of the door. My career ought to be clear now, if I have courage and heart to go on."

"You, courage and heart!" she said,

"of course you will have both, Lewis. You are not the kind of man that fails. I never for a moment expected anything else. It is not always, to be sure, that men get what they deserve; but you—you are not of the mettle which fails."

"But supposing that, and that I succeed, what is it to lead to, Lady Curtis?" he asked, half-mournfully; for it was evident to him that, as yet, she had not even the least glimmer of imagination as to what he was going to ask.

"Lead to?" she said; "the Bench of course, and perhaps the woolsack; you speak so little of yourself that I scarcely know which way your ambitions lie, Lewis, whether you care for politics at all; of course that is the finer career of the two—if you take to it."

"That is all you give me then," he said, "my choice of two dignities? I do not say they are not both great objects of ambition; but is there nothing sweeter, nothing dearer to come, my lady? You are very kind to me—kinder than I had any right to expect; but have you nothing

more to wish me in your kind heart than the woolsack and the Bench?"

She looked at him, faltering a little. She began now to see what he meant.

"What can I say more?" she said, "yes, everything, Lewis. I wish you all —you can desire."

"The desire of my heart," he said, getting up from his seat in his agitation; "that is the wish in the Psalms, and there is none that goes so far, or is so sweet. My lady, you have known me almost ever since I was fit to form a wish. Don't you know what it is—the desire of my heart?"

"Lewis—Lewis!" she cried, hastily; then stopped. Had she been about to warn him to say no more, to stop him in the revelation of his wishes? but if so she changed her mind, and looked at him eagerly, alarmed, and wringing her hands.

"You know what it is," he said, with a smile, turning to her. "I don't need to say it, do I? If I cannot have Lucy, what is everything else worth to me? I know I am not her equal in birth, if you still think that matters, beyond everything

else. But does it, does it? No one else can have thought of her so long and constantly as I have done. I know all her tastes, her ways. What she likes I like—and her brother, you know, Lady Curtis—has been all I have known for a brother."

"I know, I know," she said, and the tears in her eyes were not now tears of pleasure. She shook her head while she looked at him with motherly tenderness, through her wet eyelashes. "And you have been the best brother to him, the kindest!" she cried. "Alas!" but with all she shook her head.

"I did not mean to set up any claim on that score," he said, quickly; "but because there has been this constant affection between us, and I have never thought of any other woman. All the rest of the world has been naught to me by the side of Lucy. I have thought of no one but her. And is this all nothing, my lady, worse than nothing, because my grandfather was a tradesman? It seems hard, don't you think it is hard, difficult to bear?"

"Lewis, you know it is not so everywhere," she cried. "There are gentlemen in England—the best in the land, who would give their daughter to you, Lewis Durant, good as you are known to be, the truest gentleman, and rejoice in her happiness!" She paused, and her voice fell, and once more she shook her head. "But Sir John—"

"If I have your help, my lady, I will not be afraid of Sir John," he said, "he is not like you; but he is good to the bottom of his heart, good all through and through."

"Lewis!" cried my lady, with sudden emotion, "do you want me to be in love with you as well as Lucy? So he is, my dear boy; so he is, my dear prejudiced narrow-minded old man! he does not understand always—but he is good, as you say, all good, and no guile in him. But what has that to do with it after all, my poor boy?" she added, dropping from her enthusiasm, and shaking her head once more. "He is fond of you too, and that does not matter either; you will never get

him to see it, never! I know him better than you do."

"If you will be on my side he will come to see it," said Durant. She made him no direct reply, but hurried on.

"And all the more since we have had this disappointment with Arthur. If Arthur had married happily as we liked—as young Seymour has done—things might have been different. But now that Arthur has made such shipwreck, Lucy is all that is left to us. He will not let her speak to anyone whom he thinks inferior to her. He has almost shut the house even to his nephew Bertie; he would prefer even that she did not marry at all."

"All this will not alarm me," he said, keeping his eyes upon her, "if you are on my side."

"Think!" she said, not paying any attention; "think how bad it is for us in the county. Arthur thrown away upon a—worse than nobody: a foolish girl who has not even the wit to hold by him and make him happy—our only son! and Lucy our only daughter, if she too were to—"

"Marry a nobody!" he said, with a smile, which he could not divest of some bitterness. "Ah, Lady Curtis! that was what I feared—you are not on my side."

"Lewis, only think!" she said; "put yourself in my place! I have been so proud of my children; perhaps it was foolish, heaven knows one always suffers for it; but if neither of them—neither of them! is to—have any *succès* in marriage, make any brilliant connection. Yes, yes," she said, "it is contemptible, I know it, you have a right to scorn me; but, Lewis, put yourself in my place."

"I do," he said; "and if I could I would grudge Lucy to a nobody as much as you do; but is all my happiness to go for that, my lady? I dare not speak of hers," he said, faltering, "if I could hope that her happiness was concerned, what secondary consideration in the world could be put by the side of that?"

Lady Curtis shook her head. She clasped and unclasped her hands, with the nervousness of agitation.

"It is easy for you to say that," she

cried, "very easy for you at your stage; but happiness is not everything—happiness is not all I have to look to," and as she spoke, there flashed across Lady Curtis's mind a realization of the time when she should hear her daughter called Mrs. Durant, and listen to the anxious explanations of society, as to how old Durant the saddler, was not her father, but her grandfather-in-law. How could she bear it, how could she bear it? she who had in imagination seen her pretty daughter the admired of all admirers, at the height of splendour and fashion, and with a better title than her mother's. No, no, no; it was not to be tolerated. She could never permit it! whatever traitors might fight in her bosom for Lewis and his rights.

"This is how it is then," he said, sadly, "it is you, my friend, my kindest patroness and guide, you who have been the help to me that only such as you could be—that reject me, my lady? Why should I claim you as *my* lady—or use such a familiar term at all?"

"Lewis, don't be cruel to me," she cried.

"I am not cruel. It is only that it is you, and not Sir John, who rejects me," he said.

No intimation was made to Lucy how this interview was going on; she did not know what form it would take, nor how far Durant would go; and after the first half hour of suppressed excitement and agitation, her pride arose against the notion of waiting here for any news that might be sent her. She would not do it. She went out, rushing along, round by the back of the house, to avoid being seen from her mother's windows, and set off to visit a sick family in the Park, belonging to one of the gamekeepers. This would occupy her, and prevent her mind from dwelling upon anything Lewis might have to say to Lady Curtis, and anything my lady might reply. But it may be imagined how busy her mind was with a thousand thoughts as she struck across the damp park, upon which the hoarfrost had melted not very long before. It made her wet, but she did not care. She did not

come back, and this was done with intention, till the bell was ringing for luncheon. She saw her mother and Durant both looking anxiously down the avenue as she made her way in by the back entrance as she had gone out. "My lady wants you, Miss Lucy," all the maids told her one after another; but Lucy's pride was not to be so easily overcome. She went upstairs and took off her wet shoes and outdoor wraps with the composure of a Stoic, going down only when the summons of the bell was no longer to be neglected, for Sir John was not a man to be kept waiting. When she got down stairs, her colour a little brighter than usual, and her air perhaps conscious in the very elaboration of indifference—she found the party already assembled, her father from his library, and her mother from the morning-room, where she had been shut up the whole morning with her guest. These two gave her anxious glances, both the one and the other. Some understanding she felt sure they must have come to, as, mastering her pride and the sense of injury she felt in being thus

unacquainted with what had been going on, she sat down at the table. Why did not she know, why was not she the first person to be considered? To be sure it was her own fault. She had gone away, concealing herself from them, binding on her armour of pride, pretending not to know or care. But it was curious even to Lucy in that condition, and would have been still more curious to a calmer spectator to see Sir John taking his place in unbroken calm amid a party so agitated. Sir John knew nothing of what had been going on, of Durant's presumptuous hopes, nor of how he had been occupied winning over Lady Curtis to his side. He was full of something which had happened to himself, a little adventure which had quite roused him from his habitual calm. He told them all the story as they sat at the meal, which was little more than a pretence to the others. While he ate his cutlet he went on with his tale, telling them how he had driven out to see the state of the plantations of which Rolt had been talking, and how as they approached one special

spot he sent the groom away to inquire into some changes in the covers which he had not authorized.

"And when I got as far as Fox's Hollow," said Sir John, "I found the gate shut, which Short had assured me was always open. I was driving the black colt, Lucy; you know the animal is a restive creature and very fresh. I don't know when he had been in harness before. I remember the time when it would not have cost me much to jump down and open the gate, too quick to give any horse his head, but that is all over now. I was reflecting what to do with such a high-tempered brute, and a little doubtful whether I'd venture to get down—a slow business now, Durant, as you'll know when you have come to my years; and as I was thinking that discretion was the better part of valour, who should rise up suddenly from the bushes but—no, not a pheasant, not a covey—but a beautiful young lady. You may well open your eyes—a young creature like a princess in a strange sort of black dress. I never saw her before.

She opened the gate to me, and she made me a curtsey and gave me a smile. I can tell you, my lady, it produced such a sensation in me as I have not felt for long enough. Of course I thanked her—of course I said everything in the way of gratitude, and regret to have troubled her, and excuse of myself as an old man. But the wonder is I didn't know her! A perfectly charming creature! Could it be young Seymour's wife, or who could it be? Upon my honour, though it sounds so strange to say so, I never saw her before!"

"Then *you* have seen her, too?" cried Lady Curtis. "Now, Lucy, you perceive your papa agrees with me—"

"Who is this mysterious princess?" said Durant. He was glad as was my lady of something that relieved the painful agitation of pre-occupied thoughts.

"I don't know who she is, but she is a very charming person," said Sir John, helping himself to another cutlet. "One would think you had all lunched in secret while I have been having my adventure. Durant, you don't eat anything. If it had

been you who had seen this vision, we should have drawn our own conclusions; but it has not taken away my appetite," the old man said with a smile. "If it was young Seymour's wife, young Seymour is a lucky fellow. I can't think otherwise who she could be."

CHAPTER IX.

NANCY was not less moved by the morning's adventure than Sir John had been. She had strayed much farther than usual, taking her walk alone in the park while Matilda was busy with her outfit. The gate was close to a bit of wood where the trees were painted in all their most gorgeous autumn tints; and since Lady Curtis had admired her simple garland of leaves, her enthusiasm for them had increased. She had come out here in perfect good faith to find others which she could copy, which might please the lady who had been so kind, and whom, though only herself knew this, it was so important to please. The morning was fine, though the grass was wet, and Nancy,

tired with her walk, was sitting resting on a fallen tree. Her heart had given a little jump when she saw Sir John driving along towards her. It was all he could do to manage the high-spirited young horse. She knew him well enough by sight, and she had no fear of him such as she had felt of the ladies; her secret was safe from him. It did not even occur to her, as it might have done, that to conciliate Arthur's father would be something in her favour, so that everything occurred naturally without motive or artificial stimulus. It was, indeed, the most natural impulse which moved her to get up hastily as soon as she saw his doubtful glance at the gate, and open it. In all probability she would not have budged for Lady Curtis. The suspicion and terror in her heart would have represented to her that the readiness to do such an office might be misconstrued; but she obeyed her impulse in respect to Sir John with the most spontaneous readiness. It was agreeable to her to do him the kindly service which it always becomes the young to render to

the old. She looked up and smiled at him, and said, "You are very welcome," as he exhausted himself in thanks. And it did not make Nancy's look less gracious, or less fair, that she saw the old gentleman's admiring wonder, his evident anxiety to make out who she was. At Sir John's age a man need not hide his fatherly admiration for a lovely face. He looked at her with his white head uncovered, with pleasure and kindness and surprise in his eyes, and lavished thanks and excuses.

"I am glad I was here to do it," Nancy said, feeling that corresponding sentiment of kindness in herself, which is the soul of good manners. He thought she was as gracious, as polished and graceful as she was handsome; and a sense of gratification that warmed her heart and softened it, came over her. Arthur's father! she had not heard half so much of him as of my Lady and Lucy. She was not afraid of him, and to serve him gave her a sensation of innocent and real pleasure, which made Nancy feel affectionate to the

old man. He looked back at her as he drove away, waving his hand and smiling; and she looked after him with friendly eyes. They were friends from that moment. Lady Curtis's kindness had half broken her heart; but the encounter with Sir John made Nancy happy, made her feel herself approved, flattered, raised in her own opinion. And when a great many things have happened to lower one in one's own opinion, could anything be more grateful than this? She walked home exhilarated in mind and body, no longer languid or tired, and surprised Matilda by the news that she had met Sir John, and made acquaintance with him. "I think he is the nicest of all," said Nancy, "old gentlemen are so kind; they do not frighten you like ladies."

"Oh, frighten you!" cried Matilda, "how could her Ladyship frighten you—the kindest lady! but that your evil conscience must be always saying, what would she say if she knew? Are you going to waste your time with that rubbish again, Nancy, littering all the floor? Why can't

you go on with your beautiful drawing? that was worth while—I thought of getting a frame for it as soon as it was done."

"You can frame the original; it must be better than my copy," said Nancy, arranging her leaves. Matilda looked at her with an impatience scarcely to be restrained; but she remembered that her Ladyship had taken notice of the rubbish, and shrugged her shoulders over the strange fancies of the gentlefolks. Nancy was just the same as they were. She might have been born in that rank of life herself, she took such fancies. Matilda was thankful, as she went on with her hemming, that no such nonsense had ever occupied *her*. But to know all the details of the interview pleased her much, and she would have sat all day long stitching and listening, had not her sister commanded her, later in the afternoon, to get her hat and come out to see the sunset. "Oh, the sunset! a great deal of good that will do me; and not half my chemises done yet," Matilda murmured to herself, but she obeyed Nancy, who indeed did not

like to be disobeyed. They took the usual walk down through the village to the Hall gates, and by the stile on the left hand, the same stile over which they had come the first day they met Lucy. Since then there had always been the excitement of some possible encounter to anticipate, and as this idea occurred to her, Matilda's bosom swelled with natural exultation to think how entirely they had got into high life. Sir John and her Ladyship had become, as it were, their daily bread. If dear father had but known!

A sunset is a fine thing no doubt; but if you think of it, after all, it is not much of a sight, a thing that happens almost every day, and costs nobody a penny; a thing that the very poorest tramp may enjoy as well as you. To think how many people there are that will gaze and gaze at such a thing, and look as if they never could have enough of it! Matilda was more clever; she saw it at a glance, and did not require to look again; and, indeed, it was very hard not to believe that

it was affectation on Nancy's part to look at it so long. Matilda looked round her. There was not much to see, but it is astonishing how much you can see when your wits are about you. The spot where Nancy and her sister were standing was quite near the avenue, and as Matilda, with her mind and eyes unoccupied, looked out for something to amuse her, she suddenly was aware of two people walking up and down in what might be called the side aisle of the avenue, under the shadow of the trees, which still were rich in autumn foliage. This "took her attention" immediately; for who could it be but a pair of lovers, wandering up and down in intimate intercourse; and what is there in heaven or earth more attractive to a young woman than a pair of lovers? This sight woke Matilda out of the indifference into which the sunset had thrown her. She peered through the bushes with the liveliest interest and sympathy, not wishing to act the part of eavesdropper—and, indeed, she was too far off for that—but with the most purely benevolent regard, doing as she

would be done by. Had any disagreeable interruption of the interview threatened, Matilda would have been but too glad to act as scout and give the alarm; and soon a fact became apparent which added immensely to her interest, and, indeed, turned it into excitement: she perceived that the lady was no other than Miss Curtis. Here was a startling discovery! She made herself a little peep-hole through the branches of a gnarled hawthorn that pricked her fingers as she separated the twigs. Who was the gentleman? Matilda thought his aspect was strangely familiar. It was not the Rector, who was said in the village to be going to marry Miss Lucy. Who was it? Matilda gazed long, and then she gave a start which nearly upset her into the midst of all the prickles of the thorn. This was, indeed, something more interesting than such a cheap exhibition as a sunset. After a moment she came and plucked at her sister's arm.

"Nancy, Nancy! look here. I want you to look at something."

"What is it?" said Nancy languidly.

She was sitting on the bank, though it was damp, with her hands folded in her lap, and her face all illuminated with the golden light which dropped lower and lower every moment. It had filled Nancy's soul with thoughts. She was wondering what was to come of all this, half hopefully, half drearily; wondering if Arthur and she were to meet again, if they would ever live together again, if her life was to change into such a beautiful life as they lived, those people in the great house; or if it was to be spent dully in the cottage, obscure and hidden from all eyes. The sunset filled her eyes and glittered in the dew that filled them, and insensibly as that dew rose, the thoughts welled up into her heart.

"Nancy, Nancy!" said Matilda, "oh, look here—oh, please come and look here! It's her, as clear as daylight; and I do think it's *him*."

"Him!" Nancy began to tremble, and rose, but did not advance further. "What are you saying—who do you mean by him?"

"Will you come here and look?" cried

Matilda. "Come! I tell you, it's Miss Lucy, as sure as this is me; with her young man."

"How dare you speak so!" cried Nancy, flushing crimson, "of any of them!"

To talk of Lucy's young man seemed to her something like blasphemy. Naturally, she was becoming a purist about language as she learned what nicety of speech meant. She was a great deal more shocked than Lucy would have been.

"Well," said Matilda, stoutly, "he is her young man. What is wrong in that? They've been going up and down like two young people keeping company this hour or more, while you have been watching the sky (of course she exaggerated the time), and nothing a bit wrong in it that I can see. You've done the same yourself—and so would I if it had come in my way," said honest Matilda. Then, however, her voice sank, and she took her sister by the arm. "That's not half," she said, "Nancy, dear! and the most important's to come. Do you remember Durant, that came to Underhayes with

Arthur? You must remember Durant—him that Sarah Jane took such a fancy to."

"I remember Mr. Durant," said fastidious Nancy. "I don't know why *you* should talk of him so familiarly."

"Oh, have done with your fine talk and your nonsense!" cried Matilda. "Look here, he's *there*, Nancy! I tell you he's there, close by, courting Miss Lucy. You can come and look for yourself if you don't trust me."

Nancy came slowly, half forced by the eager Matilda, but already turning over in her mind what expedients would be necessary to escape this sudden turn of affairs. Durant! (She allowed herself to drop the Mr. in her thoughts.) He would find her out, she knew, before many hours were out. She could not keep her secret from him; he would find her, and write to Arthur, and make or mar everything. What was she to do? A great conflict arose within her. She was sick enough of this state of affairs, and if Durant did intervene to end it, would there be so very

much to regret? Arthur would come home, he would come to her, and there would be a reconciliation, and all would be well. But then, on the other hand, she had to own, with a sickening sensation in her heart, that already Arthur must have been for some time aware of "what had happened," and he had not hastened home to her. And the idea that Durant might write to him, send for him as a matter of duty, sent all the blood coursing through her veins. Never! never! She would die first. Even short of that, how much pleasanter it would be to manage everything herself, to leave it to Providence, than that, anyhow, Durant should step in. All these thoughts rushed in a heap into her mind, tumultuous, rolling and rushing over each other like clouds before the wind, as she took the half-dozen steps necessary to bring her to Matilda's point of vision to verify what Matilda had seen. But it did not require any verification to Nancy. She had felt sure it was true from the first moment. It was exactly the thing that was most likely to happen. She looked through the thorn

branches, however, with a wakening of sympathy, such as she had scarcely yet felt, in Lucy. Lucy of late had been lost in Sir John and her ladyship; and when she had thought of her specially it was with jealous fear rather than sympathy. Now she watched her with a curious mingling of interest and opposition. It seemed wrong to Nancy that Miss Curtis should be here with a young man without the knowledge of her father and mother; and Durant, Durant, who had his living to make like any common man! She remembered very well what Arthur had told her about him. He, it was clear, could be no match for Lucy; it was not right, it was not *nice* of Lucy. The forehead of Mrs. Arthur contracted. She did not like any coming down in the family with which she was connected. She liked to think of them all as very great people indeed, quite above that necessity of working for a living which brought down Durant to the ordinary level of man. All this, however, was by the way; and the immediate thing she had to consider was what she herself would do in this new

emergency. She ended hastily at last, when the pair of lovers (since they could be nothing else) turned their faces towards the Hall. Nancy seized her sister's arm, and without saying anything rushed hastily towards the stile. They got over it, and out of the gates, while still the backs of the others were turned; and then for the moment the two young women ventured to take breath and feel themselves safe.

"They were going up towards the house," said Nancy; "we have no need to hurry." But she gave looks of alarm behind her, and walked rapidly back to the cottage. As ill luck would have it they met the Rector, who stopped, as he always did, and kept them talking. When he had insisted on planting himself in their path for a full minute, Nancy got desperate. He was to be got rid of, she felt, at all hazards.

"We met Miss Curtis in the avenue just now," she said. "She had a gentleman with her. Do you know if there is a gentleman of the name of Durant, or something like that, visiting at the Hall?"

"Oh, Durant is there, is he?" said the Rector, with a look of annoyance. "Yes, I know him. He used to be very intimate then; but I had hoped he had not been so much in favour of late. I say frankly, 'I hope,' for I am not fond of him. He is a nobody, a—perhaps you have met him, Mrs. Arthur. He has got into very good society, somehow or other; but he is nobody."

"I think I have seen him somewhere; but you will find him now in the avenue with Miss Curtis; and we must hurry back," she said, nodding and smiling as she went on. She liked Durant a great deal better than she liked Bertie; but to escape from her present dilemma was more important than either. "Now, Matilda, make haste; let us get home," she said. She had sent the Rector "after them," not without a certain malicious pleasure. She had freed herself from the immediate danger in which she lay. He would talk, and they would be obliged to listen, as, otherwise, Nancy would have been; and with another anxious look behind, she sped along the

road. But it was an unlucky day. In the village street they met Mrs. Rolt, who also had a thousand things to say. She rushed across the street with a budget full of news, and laughed and joked, and congratulated the young stranger on having made such an impression upon Sir John. Mrs. Rolt told Nancy that she had been at the Hall immediately after luncheon, and that Sir John would talk of nothing else.

"And he is a very good friend, a faithful friend, though he is not very demonstrative," said Cousin Julia; "but, indeed, my dear, he was quite demonstrative about you, and talked of you all the time. Mr. Durant was there," she added confidentially, "and I don't think he much wanted Mr. Durant. You know there was always a kindness between him and Lucy; but it would be quite out of the question for Lucy, quite out of the question, especially since her brother's unfortunate marriage."

"What has her brother's marriage got to do with it?" cried Nancy, forgetting, in this unexpected attack, even her fears.

"Oh, my dear, don't you know what a dreadful thing it is for the family? It has spoiled Arthur's life, poor fellow. Where are the heirs to come from?" Cousin Julia cried pathetically. "However bad she might be, it would not be quite so bad, you know, if there were any heirs; but the succession, my dear! Lucy must marry, and she must marry well, or what is to become of the family?" Mrs. Rolt said with decision. "She, too, will have to suffer for her brother. The innocent are always involved with the guilty; and when once a wrong thing has been done, one never knows where it may end."

Nancy had grown crimson with shame and resentment—and with pain too, pain that she could not fathom in all its complexities. She turned away coldly from Mrs. Rolt, scarcely attempting to separate from her with the pretence at civility, which good manners (she felt) demanded. The innocent involved with the guilty! how dared anyone so speak of her? She went on to her cottage, forgetting her previous alarms, holding her head high, and she did

not take any notice of the sound of wheels behind her, the rapid dash of a dog-cart which came whirling along and round the corner from the Hall. But she came to herself with a start and cry, when turning round suddenly she met Durant's look, which flashed from the ordinary calm of an indifferent passer-by into profound surprise and instant eagerness at sight of her. The dog-cart was going so fast, with so much "way" upon it, that it was a minute before it could be drawn up and he could spring down from it. In that minute, Nancy aroused to the necessity of the case, had darted down a little side alley, by which she knew she could reach the back-door of the cottage. Fortunately there was nobody about to see her fly along past the little gardens to the open kitchen door. She darted in to the alarm of Fanny, and flying breathless upstairs rushed to the shelter of her own room.

"If anyone calls I am ill in bed," she cried, as she passed, to the consternation of the little maid. Matilda, by this time was quietly seated in the little sitting-

room at work. "Come up with me, come up with me. Durant is after me!" cried Nancy, breathless. Matilda had presence of mind to obey without a word, though she made a mental memorandum as she went upstairs after her sister. "She says Durant, too," Matilda said to herself—but she made no audible protest; and from a corner between the curtains she watched and reported how the dog-cart waited, and how long a time it was before the visitor came back baffled, after following down the alley and finding nothing.

"He is looking very suspicious-like at all the houses," said Matilda.

"Oh, keep close, keep close!" cried Nancy, from the bed on which she was crouching—as if he could see in through the curtains. They spent an anxious half-hour watching his proceedings, for the dog-cart drove away and then came back, and their fears were renewed for another tremulous moment. But Durant fortunately did not apply to anyone who could give him information. He trusted apparently to his own sharp-sightedness,

or to the hope that Nancy had hidden herself, and would reappear again. The sisters did not venture to draw breath until it was clear that he was gone.

Here was another and important embarrassment and difficulty in their way. They did not know that Durant's day's occupation had been so very important to himself as to eclipse all other interests. They thought he would come back next day to search thoroughly, and make sure that they did not escape him. For to Nancy in the present crisis it was evident that nothing else could be half so important; her own affairs naturally appeared to her the most likely subject to absorb Durant's thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

THE explanation between Durant and Lucy, of which Nancy had been, so to speak, a spectator, and which had filled her with such doubtful feelings, before the moment when she apprehended peril to herself—had taken place under difficulties. It was only when driven up into a corner by his repeated appeals that Lady Curtis had given a doubtful and reluctant assent —it did not deserve so cordial a title as consent — to his petition — which was only that he might be allowed to refer the question to Lucy herself. "If she says no, there will not be another word to say," he had represented. Lady Curtis had only replied by shaking her head, a gesture which filled him with exhilaration, though after all it might have meant some-

thing different from the conclusion he drew from it. But after the confused meal, which he was so anxious to get over and so impatient of, it was some time before Lucy's attention could be secured. She was coy and unwilling, and half-angry, he thought, while her mother, though so affectionate to himself, would have been glad enough to stave off the interview which she had reluctantly promised might take place between them. She would not go back from her word; but if she could manage to get it postponed, deferred till the last moment, Lady Curtis would have felt that something was gained. And things seemed to fall out in harmony with her purpose as the afternoon went on. Sir John took possession of Durant in the first place to show him something, and then Lady Curtis managed to keep by Lucy's side, hoping that the time at which he had settled to leave them would have come too near for any explanation before the opportunity came. But Durant was not the kind of man to be so baffled by circumstances. When he saw

the policy she was pursuing (and which, with an hypocrisy which half-maddened, half-amused, half-touched him, she seemed to confess and beg pardon for, with deprecating beseeching looks) he broke openly through the maze she was entangling his feet in. He went up to Lucy boldly as she sat by her mother's side.

"There is something that I want to say to you," he said, with a tremulousness very unlike his usual steady tones. "Your mother has permitted me to ask you—to hear me—"

"Do not say that, Lewis, do not say that," cried Lady Curtis. "I could not forbid it—that was all."

"It comes to the same thing. Will you hear what I have to say—will you listen to me? It may be nothing to you, but it is everything in the world to me!"

Lucy grew crimson red, then pale, then red again. "Can you say it here?" she asked, in a scarcely audible voice.

"Anywhere, wherever you will, no place can change what I have to say; but rather alone," he cried, growing so agitated

that his words were half inarticulate too. Lady Curtis got up with a sigh to leave them. But Lucy felt the atmosphere of the room, the sense of constraint in the very air, stifle her. She sprang up hurriedly. "Stay here, mamma, I will go out with Lewis," she said, scarcely knowing what she said. It was quite unawares that this unconscious familiar utterance of his name anticipated everything more she could say on her side, as his appeal had forestalled everything on his. She caught up her hat and a shawl as she went out, then turned to him with a question in her eyes—was it a question? She knew as well as he did, and he knew as well she did. Had it not all been settled years ago?

Lady Curtis was very restless when she was thus left behind. She had given her unwilling assent only on hard conditions—that nothing more than this one interview should at present pass between the lovers—that no formal engagement should be made or correspondence begun, and nothing as yet be said to Sir John. She was to

"manage" him as best she could, taking her opportunity; nothing was to be hurried or forced. They were to wait the next change in the drama of Arthur's fortunes. If anything happened in that, Sir John might be more easy to manage. But though she set up all these imaginary defences round her, Lady Curtis knew very well that in ceding one point she had virtually ceded all. How keep two persons who understood each other, who were faithful to each other, who could neither be coerced nor frightened, apart? the thing was impossible. It might be done for a time making everybody uncomfortable, but the means of permanently afflicting Lucy, whom her parents loved, who was more precious to them than all the rest of the world! This was folly she knew. Sir John might resist, and he would regret—but yield he must if they insisted. And what could Lucy do else? Lady Curtis was, as she avowed to herself, with a smile and a tear, a little in love with Lewis too. He was so kind, so true, so good a stay and support to all belonging

to him; he was—what need to prolong descriptions—Lewis; and had not all been said in that word for years? Of course Lucy would insist: not undutifully, not untenderly, but steadily, and to the end of her days; there would be no passion, no tragedy—but she would never change. Her mother knew this as well as she knew her child's name, and began to consider, as she wandered about restless, wondering when they would come back again, wondering what they could find to say to each other so long, wondering at Durant's determination and Lucy's courage, how she could make the best of it and reconcile herself to the inevitable. He would be successful in his profession, that there seemed no doubt of now—he would reach, perhaps, the bench, and then Lucy might be Lady Durant. Lady Curtis shrugged her shoulders at this prospect. She was apt to gibe at her own position, and talk of "we Commoners;" but legal honours of that description were lowlier than any lowliness which could be affected by the head of a great county family, tenth

baronet, with dormant titles in his race which he did not care to claim. Lady Durant! "granddaughter-in-law of old Durant, you know, the saddler." This was what would be said. Lady Curtis thought she could hear the very sound of the voices lightly tripping over these syllables. To be sure many greater ladies than she had accepted the sons of *parvenus* for their daughters. Duchesses did it every day; but then dukes were made for that sort of thing, she said to herself with a smile; were they not a kind of coroneted steam-engines to drag up the lower classes? very different from us, Commoners. There was always the woolsack it is true, an institution which does a great deal for the *noblesse* of the robe. With a whimsical half-amusement she began to calculate whether she was likely to live to see Lewis Lord Chancellor. He might do it (if he was ever going to do it) in twenty years. Twenty years would suffice as well as a hundred. Lady Curtis was but forty-seven, there was no particular reason why she should not live

as long as that, and such an elevation of course would very much sweeten the Lady Durant.

But how long these two were? What could they possibly find to say to each other? It was close upon the hour at which Lewis had ordered his dog-cart, and he had a long drive before him. Then she went to her room and put on her outdoor garments, and went out to meet the lovers. She walked down the avenue half-satisfied, half-vexed that they had gone so far. Why should they have preferred to get out of sight of the house? and yet it was better that they should not thus suddenly thrust themselves under the observation of Sir John. With a flutter in her bosom of mingled pleasure and pain, she perceived them in the distance. It hurt her infinitesimally, yet consciously, to see her Lucy, her shy, delicate, fastidious flower of maidenhood, leaning upon any man's arm *so*; and yet the happiness in Lucy's bosom was it not almost her own. When she came up to them herself blushing, and half abashed to meet their eyes, the young man was so bold as to come up to her, under her own

trees, and kiss her cheek. He had done it once before when she clung to him in the depths of her trouble; but there was a dauntless assurance in this kiss which startled her. She might, perhaps, have crushed him under her frown with severe disapproval, but that the dog cart at that moment was audible, coming rapidly down upon them. There was no time to be angry when he was going away. She took her daughter's arm when he was gone, drawing it closely into hers as they stood aside to watch him dash down the avenue, for he was late. Lady Curtis held Lucy close, and the daughter clung to the mother; but is the clinging ever so close again, after a man's arm has had that softest, warmest pressure? Lady Curtis, with a sigh, felt the difference—or thought she did, which comes to the same thing.

And as Durant drove away, with his head full of Lucy, he was suddenly transfixed, shot point-blank, as it were, by the eyes of Mrs. Arthur, raised in surprise and alarm to his face. Nancy! here! It

was so incredible, and his mind was so preoccupied, that he almost upset his dog-cart, pulling it up with a jerk, then dropped the reins, which had been held so firmly, on the horse's neck. He did not know if he was awake or dreaming as he stumbled down, the surprise was so great, the shock so sudden. Nancy! It seemed to him that there was a kind of suggestion of help, a thread of guidance thrown out to him by this sudden apparition. He rushed after her, asking one or two gaping wayfarers who had not perceived her, who the lady was, as he followed her track; but fear had given wings to Nancy, and she had reached shelter before he came in sight. He wandered about aimlessly for some little time, as has been seen, asking vague questions, and gazing about at the houses. But as nobody had seen the lady to whom he referred, and as in his excitement his description, perhaps, was less clear than usual, he made nothing by his inquiries. They pointed out Mrs. Rolt's house to him, which he knew, and everything in it; and as the evening was already

falling, Durant felt himself forced at last to resume his way. He could not make out all that he expected, all that seemed to flutter about through the confusion in his thoughts—possibilities for the future, new lights, new likelihoods; for it must be remembered that his mind was already in a whirl with all that had happened to himself within the last half-dozen hours—more than had happened for the half-dozen years before, or, indeed, during all his life.

There was to be no correspondence; yet Lady Curtis was not surprised to get a letter next day, enclosing one for Lucy.

"Just this once," he pleaded; "and not for mere gratification of writing to her. There is something I want to tell her. You will not refuse me this once."

Lady Curtis did not refuse him. She gave the note to Lucy with a smile and a sigh, and a little shrug of her shoulders.

"What is this great thing he has to tell you, I wonder? The same thing, I suppose, that he took so long to tell you the other day."

"Indeed, it must be something he has

forgotten," said Lucy, with simple seriousness; but she took the note upstairs to read in her own room, running off on pretence of wanting something—a pretence which her mother, with another sigh and shrug of her shoulders, understood well enough. And, indeed, Durant had not failed to take advantage of his opportunity. The little letter was a love-letter, a kind of thing which is too exquisite for common touch; but it had a postscript, which was its *raison d'être*.

"*This is what I shall want to be always telling you, what I shall tell you in my heart daily and hourly till I have you there in real presence, my Lucy,*" the deceiver wrote; and then, with a twist of his hand, in a changed writing even, "But I should not have dared to write but for a strange fact I found out after I left you—ARTHUR'S WIFE IS IN OAKLEY. It seems incredible, but it is true. I saw her on the road. She disappeared at the sight of me by a back-lane, and must have gone into some house. You will tell them or not, as you please; but I must tell *you*. There seems,

I can't quite tell how, hope for ourselves in it. My darling!" And then the other kind of writing began again, with which we sober-minded persons have nothing to do.

Lucy, it may be supposed, was extremely excited by this communication; not just at first, it must be allowed, not till she had read it about six times over did the real point of it strike her mind. At first it was the other part of the letter that occupied her; and when Lady Curtis said, smiling, "What was the great piece of news—an old enough story, I suppose?" Lucy meant no deception in her response. But by and by the fact began to acquire its real importance in her mind. She had no longer a moment's doubt on the subject; had not instinct whispered it to her at once? Nancy was here, within her reach, within her influence; and only one thing could be meant by this, that the rebellious young woman who had made Arthur so unhappy, had seen the error of her ways, and was willing to depart from them, to seek the favour of her husband's

family, to endeavour to please them, that there might be a reconciliation and universal pardoning of all offences, in prospect. Lucy, when she wholly realized the important fact thus communicated to her, was lost in perplexity. What was she to do? A strange reluctance sprang up in her mind to speak of it, to bring it to any one's observation. Would it not be better to let this strange young woman, by whom Lucy had at once been attracted and repelled, work out her intentions, whatever they were? It was not natural that the young lady should think with special kindness, or, indeed, without a certain prejudice, of this interloper. Lucy's feeling, to start with, had been all in her sister-in-law's favour. Before the marriage had taken place, when the question was whether Arthur should be persuaded or forced into faithlessness to his promise, Lucy had been Nancy's faithful, if reserved, supporter. She had been horrified by the suggestion that a man's plighted word and promised love were not binding, when the woman to whom they were pledged was in an inferior

class. This doctrine had shocked and revolted every feeling in her heart, and when her family had made ignoble efforts to buy off Nancy, Lucy had been as indignant as Arthur was. But now everything was changed. The resemblances in nature and the diversity in circumstances, which gave her a fellow-feeling with this girl in one stage of her history, gave her a certain sense of repulsion now. She had thought it a mere foolish imagination on her part to identify Mrs. Arthur at the Wren Cottage with Nancy; but even while doing so, Lady Curtis's ready prepossession in her favonr, and the easy fascination she had exercised over Sir John, had given Lucy a slight involuntary prick of displeasure. What did they see in this young woman to be so readily pleased by her? She was pretty. Was that all that was necessary? Lucy was in no way injured by it, it took nothing from her, yet she felt more than half angry at the rapid conquest of her parents which the stranger had made. They were quite absurdly interested in her. Why? Sir John spoke

of her as if she had been a princess, and even her mother, who, as a woman, should have had more discrimination, had been disposed to rave about this new face, in which, after all, there was no such dazzling beauty as to carry the world by storm. Lucy had been a little vexed with herself for feeling this, yet she had felt it. She had been inclined in her own person to bestow her attention upon the homely sister, who was a good modest little body and claimed no one's admiration. And when this strange certainty came to confirm the guess, which even to herself had seemed too fantastic for fact, Lucy felt an instant increase of prejudice, an almost dislike for which she could give no reason, and which was at once impolitic and unkind. Why should her mind turn against Nancy now? Was it not for the interest of the family as well as her own that she should in every way cultivate the possibility of reunion between Arthur and his wife? It must be for Arthur's good that he should be delivered out of his false position, and should live out his life honestly, having

chosen it; and it must be to the advantage of the family that its heir should be replaced in his natural place, both for the present and the future. Finally, there could be no doubt whatever that it would be for Lucy's own interest in the new development of her lot. If Arthur was like any other young married man, united to a wife whom his parents had learned to like at least, whether they approved of her or not, how much easier would everything be for the now impossible marriage of the daughter who at present was their only hope! But it cannot be said that this suggestion of her own lessened value and importance, and the likelihood that Nancy might free her by taking her place in her father's house, was at all an agreeable thought to Lucy Curtis. It might promote her "happiness;" but it certainly, for the moment, did not make her more happy. She was unreasonable—as we all are more or less. Yes, she would be glad that Arthur should be "happy," that all should go well; but to think of her mother's sudden fancy for this stranger,

of her father's swift subjugation, of Nancy holding her own place at Oakley, doing all the things she had done, accepted by everybody as the young lady of the place, this was hard upon Lucy. For the moment it gave her an almost intolerable prick—though she took herself to task for it instantly with hot rage and self-contempt. How mean and poor, what a wretched pitiful creature she was!

Then, however, after all this feeling, came the practical side of the matter. Should she let her mother know? Lucy had no secrets from her mother, except indeed that one of her love, before her love had been openly asked for—a thing which not the most tenderly confidential of daughters could be expected to disclose. She made an heroic effort to clear from her mind all prejudice, all momentary and accidental irritation of feeling. Which was best? To let this incognito have its full value, to permit Arthur's wife to have the entire advantage of the effort she was visibly making, and keep her secret? If it were prematurely revealed it was possible that

the effort itself would tell against Nancy, at least with Lady Curtis. To let her do her best, to say nothing, to give her the chance of making them her friends, would not that be the kindest thing that Arthur's sister could do? The conclusion is very easily stated, but it took a long time to arrive at; but it was on this that Lucy decided at last.

"Will you reply for me?" she said to her mother; "no—I am not going to exceed your permission, mamma. I will abide by my promise not to write. Say from me," said Lucy with a blush, "that I—respond in my heart to all he says; but that, at present, on all subjects it is best not to speak. Will you tell him that word for word."

"Faithfully, my darling—and thank you, my Lucy," said the mother, kissing her, with the quick moisture rising in her eyes. Then she added with a smile, "I suppose I may give him—your love?"

Lady Curtis was not hard upon the young people after all.

CHAPTER XI.

ARTHUR CURTIS had not been leading a self-denying or ascetic life; indeed he had been nearer the depths of moral decadence in the recent months than ever before. He had got reckless about himself and his life; not coarsely reckless, as men are who plunge into the ruder dissipations, but so discouraged and weary that by mere dint of ceasing to care what he did, he had ceased to do well, and almost dropped into the gulf on the opposite side. He had been foolish enough in the past, but his aim had been towards, if not the most exalted objects of ambition, yet those of honesty, truth, faithfulness, and pure living. It might have been unwise to love as he did, so far out

of the region he himself belonged to; but, at least, his love brought no harm to any one, and had no evil thought in it. He had been faithful to it, notwithstanding everything that had come in his way; opposition and entreaty on the side of his family, and partial disgust and discontent on his own, had not moved him; but of what good had all his faithfulness been? What good had his honesty and pure intentions done him? He was stranded upon the shore—laid aside helpless and with little hope from the graver developments of existence. He was bound for life to the wife who had become a stranger to him—who had thrust him away from her; and hopelessly cut off from all other honourable connections, from the happiness of home, from everything which makes up to a young man for the loss of his first freedom. Arthur had all the evils of that freedom without the good of it; he was bound yet let loose, tempted to every kind of license, yet in such a position that ordinary and innocent liberty was denied to him. Nothing could be

more cruel to a high-spirited young man not trained in the ways of self-denial. And by the time these two years were over he had become sick of it all: The restraints that confined him, the conscience which reminded him of these restraints, and the injured love that gnawed at his heart and felt like rage. What good had come to him of all his efforts to do well—of all the honest meaning of his soul? The gayest and least self-denying of his comrades was better off than he; and he had been on the borders of vice—not compelled by any force of passion, but rather by disgust and unwilling cynicism, the what does it matter? of the despairing soul. On the borders of vice—and half-unbelieving in anything better—half giving up all that was better in this world—trying to persuade himself that nothing mattered. Youth comes to this alternative of happiness very easily. The wisdom which has found out that in happiness, or unhappiness, life jogs on much the same, and that all is not unmitigated evil in the worst circumstances, nor unmitigated

good in the best; is an elderly kind of wisdom But Arthur was impatient of his own hopelessness—he felt his own weariness intolerable; which is as much as to say that neither the hopelessness nor the impatience was entirely genuine, or had half the sway he thought of in his heart.

Their immediate effect however, was a great bitterness and restlessness, and distaste for everything around him. He had got to hate his new life, his occupations, and the pleasures which perhaps palled more quickly than his occupations; and all that flutter of diplomatic talk, which is so like the flutter of the smallest parish business, but that the topics are more important. Those personal discussions and reports, the "he said" and "she said" which pretend to be of vital importance when the hes and the shes are kings and queens, but are so like common gossip in every other respect became tiresome beyond description. All this which had carried him away from his own presumably small affairs at first, and had

sounded great and magnificent, sickened him now with its paltriness. "Depend upon it the Emperor meant so and so." "But I assure you Count A—— said—" What was a man the better for this? he asked himself with disdain. Nothing at all the better, much the worse, as having it urged upon his attention that mere gossip and nonsensical bustle, and officious fussiness thrust themselves in at the gravest moments, and have a part in the greatest events. Mrs. Bates discussing the affairs of her chapel and the private dissensions between the minister and the deacons, or a Secretary of Legation busily calculating how the Emperor and Count A. and Prince B. contradicted each other, what was the difference? Was it not all petty, miserable, unworthy? What was a man the better of it? And though the *salons* were more lovely and the style of conversation more graceful, was not the subject everywhere much the same as in the parlour at Underhayes, in which Arthur had made such close acquaintance with the vulgarities of life? He was disgusted with them all. The only good

under the sun was surely to enjoy as much as you could where you could, leaving all other considerations aside. Be happy—if that come within your powers—but if not happy, then be amused, if you are able to be so, distracted from your own thoughts, entertained, if not by the love and kindness, at least by the folly, and affectations, and self-regard of others. This creed was not naturally to the taste of a frank and open-hearted young man, sympathetic with his fellow-creatures, manly, and friendly, and gentle of heart; but his unhappiness had given him a twist, and all the training he was at present subject, to all the influences round him, led him that way. What did it matter? Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die. Arthur was on the eve of ceding to this creed. He was on the edge of that pit which is bottomless, and in which there is so little hope; and he might have ended by being a gay infidel, a chill but laughing cynic, even an unbeliever in everything good, who should not only accept that negative of every virtue, but be amused by it, the last

degradation. He had all but given in, when Durant's letter telling him of the disappearance of Nancy came suddenly into his life like a thunderbolt. He had thought as little about Nancy as possible, poor fellow! She was living the life she had chosen to live under the protection of her parents in the home she preferred. Arthur knew the half-savage reserve and purity of the girl too well to have any doubt of her honour to him. It was not that she could transfer her heart to another; but that she had no heart at all so far as he was concerned; not that she was unfaithful in love, but that she could live without love. He had written to her without eliciting any answer at first; then he had ceased to write; he had heard nothing of her for about eighteen months, except that her money was paid; not a sign of her had come to him in all that time. His heart had gone through all the stages of longing, of waiting, of dire anxiety, of lingering hope against hope. And then he had turned resolutely away from the ungrateful one. He never mentioned so much as her name to anyone,

he gave up his correspondence with Durant, he dropped this past of his in that grave of obscurity into which so many men cast, one after another, in broken pieces, the lives they have thrown away. It was not his fault, or at least it was very far from being all his fault that these chances of life had been thrown away; but now let them go and let no one attempt to make any wail over them. She was well off, among the people she liked best, well cared for, cherished as she chose to be cherished, though not as he would have cherished her. Let her be. She was his, but she was not for him, nor could anyone else be for him. She had desolated the life which he had consecrated to her. Henceforward there was a blank in it which she would not, and which no one else could fill. The legitimate ties, the purer hopes were over. But there were other solaces more cheaply to be had—if he could have persuaded himself to accept those husks which the swine eat; and to these last degrading feasts he was making up his mind.

When suddenly Durant's news came

into his life like a thunderbolt, breaking the stagnation of the unwholesome air. This woman who belonged to him was, like himself, alone in the world. The humble coterie which she had preferred to him was broken up. All that she had loved and clung to had gone from her. Perhaps she too might have felt, even before this, the dreariness of that existence deprived of its closest tie, to which she had condemned him; but at least she must feel it now. Everything had gone from her, the shelter of her father's house, the natural protection and moral support which perhaps had kept her in her error; but which must have failed her now along with everything else. The first feeling in Arthur's mind was a keen pity for Nancy. She had done him grievous wrong, she had wasted all their mutual chances of happiness; but she was young, inexperienced, foolish, a child playing with the most dangerous elements, not knowing any better, and now the time had come when she must bear the penalty too. But when he realized the results of the misfortune that had be-

fallen his wife, and heard that she had left Underhayes and thrown up the allowance which he had been so much surprised, and disappointed, and satisfied to find her accept at first, Arthur's heart swelled with a more generous, more happy sentiment than had touched it for months before. Had not this been one of the things which had disgusted him most with human nature, though he had never put it into words? The thought that his wife when she left him, though she would not accept love from him, would accept money, humiliating, degrading thought! With a start and sudden thrill of recognition he heard that she had thrown it aside now, and this one fact threw light to him upon all that went before, and seemed to bring her back to him cleared of a thousand misapprehensions. At last he recognised again his Nancy, proud, rash, daring, imprudent, capable of any outburst of passionate folly, but not of mercenary calculation or the prudence of a deliberate bargain.

He saw it all now, he thought; and in his thoughts, did, could anyone wonder? as

much injustice to the poor vulgar couple in their graves, who were not any more mercenary than poverty compelled them to be, as he had formerly done to his hot-headed and foolish wife. It had been their fault; they had forced her into this vulgar settlement which had so revolted him, this compounding for the injuries of the heart by an allowance. Had he not known all along that it could not be Nancy? What could be more unlike Nancy, so independent, so defiant, so rash and regardless of all dictates of prudence as she had been? It had been a mystery to him, and burning pain all through; but now he recognised her again. It was as if suddenly, after long obliteration from his memory, her face with all the characteristic defects and imperfections of its beauty, defects far more sweet than the faulty faultlessness of others, had all at once gleamed upon him out of the gloom. Perhaps, how could he tell, if he had been less distant, if she had been less proud, she might have turned to him in her grief and loneliness,

sought his natural support, his natural consolation; but at least she had vindicated herself by that hasty, foolish immediate action. If not love, then not money, no bargain, no mercenary advantage. Through the gloom, through the distance, flashing with anger, veiled with tears, Nancy's eyes seemed suddenly to gleam upon him, Nancy's voice, faltering yet firm, to fling at him a defiance, a challenge —was it an appeal? There came from Arthur's breast a sudden burst of cries and laughter mingled, and his eyes in his solitude filled with tears, salt and scalding but sweet. And as he sat there alone he blushed fiery red over brow and throat. To what ignoble rivalship, what miserable partaking, had he almost degraded his wife! but heaven be praised this voice out of the darkness had come in time.

And at first it did not occur to him that this sudden and prompt vindication of herself, which set Nancy right, brought external consequences with it which might alarm any man. What could she do to make up for the loss of her living which

must ensue? She would be not only an orphan and friendless—but also penniless, with nothing, and no one to keep her from want. This is a thought which might well appal a man used to all the resources of wealth, and who had no notion how poor people contrive to stumble on, and keep body and soul together upon no income at all. A shiver of pain got into Arthur's being at thought of the sacrifices and straits she might be driven to; though that was not half so powerful at first as the relief and satisfaction of the other discovery, that she was herself still, foolish, rash, passionate, but not mercenary. It grew upon him, however, as the days went on, and no answer came to the letter he wrote instantly imploring Durant (whose time and labours seemed to his friends to belong to them) to lose no time in finding Nancy. As it happened, and as it happens so often in the emergencies of individual history, Arthur could not at that moment rush home himself, as he would have done almost at any other time, to rescue his wife from her self-imposed privations,

whatever they might be. His chiefs were absent, there was a lull in diplomatic business, and it was his duty to remain at his post, to note the small gossip of the court, and chronicle all the small beer, and make into national importance the scraps of remark that fell from Count A. and Prince B.

For a month or more he was kept doing this, chafing at every day as it passed, and growing more and more excited, more and more anxious. By and by Durant wrote that he was making every possible research, but had as yet discovered nothing. And then there arose a very fever of anxious thought in Arthur's mind. Where could she be? what might she be doing? what privations might she be enduring, what toils, what hardships? All the stories of distress he had ever heard, of proud poverty, of struggles for employment, of Spartan independence starving calmly sooner than ask for a morsel, all the taunts and spurns which patient merit from the unworthy takes, came rushing upon his recollection. While he lived daintily and slept softly, his Nancy, his wife, might be

turning away discouraged, penniless, without shelter, from some door which was closed upon her. Heaven above! what could he do? He sent wild advertisements to the "Times," he wrote ceaseless letters to Durant. Find her! was his cry; though indeed Nancy was spending her time, on the whole, very comfortably, as the reader knows. But Arthur did not think of the little fortune—the two hundred and fifty pounds which was to have been handed over to her sisters. Nothing had been done about it, and it had not found a place in his memory; he did not think of anything reasonable, he only lost himself in a vague cloud of excitement, terror, and anxiety, intensified by the fact that it was impossible for him to get away, and to go in search of her himself. And his troubles were made tenfold greater still by a chance meeting with his Paris friend, Denham, who "thought he had seen" Mrs. Arthur Curtis somewhere, but could not recollect where. Denham knew, as everybody did, that the husband and wife were separated; and he

was curious, and ventured upon some leading question to which Arthur in his state of suspense fell a ready victim. He did not conceal that he was anxious, "not having heard from his wife for some time," he allowed; and then Denham on his side recollected that he had seen her somewhere; where was it he had seen her? Was it in Paris, was it London? he had quite lately come from England; and he could not recollect where it was—at a railway-station somewhere—but where? The impression left upon Arthur's mind was that she might be coming to him, and this beguiled his anxiety for a few days, making him tremble at every strange sound, and expect day and night her arrival—which never came. This final trial made an end of him, poor fellow! It ruined his chance of sleep, so that his nights and days alike became torment to him. And the probation lasted for more than a month after he had heard that Nancy had left Underhayes—a month—which felt like a century. It was far on in November when at last he was re-

leased from his post, and could start for home. For home! where was that, he asked himself, sadly? could it now exist anywhere for him except where she was, who was a part of him, who had no one now but himself, and who, by rejecting that last material tie between them, had caught back the sick heart which had begun to flutter downward. But never, never again could he fall back into that disgusted and weary infidelity of thought. All this time his pride and his reviving affection had kept him from communicating his anxiety to his family. They did not know Nancy as he did, they would not think of her as he did, that was certain. Their pride would be hurt by the idea of poverty or distress falling upon her, but not their hearts touched. If they should happen to hear of her as labouring perhaps for daily bread, a poor needlewoman, a poorer teacher, they would think of her not nobly, but ignobly, as driven to it by folly, not forced by proud independence. He would not say anything to them. He did not even let them know that he was coming

back. Whether he went to Oakley or not would depend upon many other things, and he was full of the unconscious cruelty which springs from pre-occupation and partial indifference. He did not think what would be the feelings of his father and mother when they heard he was in England, but as much apart from them as if he were still in Vienna. What were they in comparison with Nancy? Nancy who was young, poor, lonely, without guardian or helper. All the fathers and mothers in the world were nothing compared with her. This is not a pleasant consideration for the fathers and mothers; but yet it was true.

A few days were necessarily lost in travelling; and what so good as the long compulsory seclusion of a railway carriage, shutting you absolutely up with yourself, while the long lines of country, plain, and hill sweep pass, and all the outside hurry and bustle do nothing but make the whirling silence of the box in which you are enclosed more complete—for the feeding of anxiety and cherishing of all troublous

thoughts? The mere certainty that he must not surrender himself to his fears had given him a certain power of self-control so long as he remained at Vienna, which now abandoned him altogether. His mind was in a fever by the time he reached London. It was late at night, and the only thing he could do was to throw himself into a cab and drive to Durant's chambers in the Temple, where, in all the commotion of his feverish thoughts, he was brought to a sudden standstill by the information that Durant was out of London, engaged on the business of the Commission on which he had been appointed. He had not even heard of this commission; for Lewis had been reluctant to write of the many events which had lately occurred, not knowing what his friend might think of his own half-permitted betrothal, or whether it was not best that Nancy should have an undisturbed moment to make her way with the family at Oakley. This had kept Durant silent for longer than was, perhaps, quite friendly; but, as fate would have it, he had taken heart of grace at last, and had

written to Arthur on the very day on which Arthur had left Vienna; and the letter which would have given so much information arrived in the one capital just as the person to whom it was addressed reached the other. He was cruelly disappointed by Durant's absence. It seemed something like a crime in the confusion of his thoughts. What was any public commission in the world to the commission which affected his friend's happiness, the succour of a woman who was to that friend more than all the world beside? Arthur could scarcely keep his patience even with the innocent laundress who answered his questions. He went into his friend's room, and found there his own letter announcing his coming, which had arrived only a few hours before him, and which he tore vehemently into a hundred pieces. But all his rage and vehemence could do nothing for him. He was obliged to go away, to go to an hotel, and in utter impossibility of doing anything, to eat and to sleep, which, perhaps, saved him from a fever. It was all that could be done that night.

CHAPTER XII.

TO know something which those about you do not know—to keep something secret which would interest them above measure, and affect their conduct; but which you, in your superior wisdom, believe it better they should not know—this is to play a very difficult part, one of the most difficult in life. And if you undertake it without possessing the necessary qualities of reticence and self-control, with, on the contrary, all the habits of an innocent life, the traditions of family frankness and inter-communication of everything, great or small; and if to add to all these difficulties you have been in the habit of living with one other close companion as if you and she had pos-

sessed between you but one soul—it may be imagined how hard the task will be. This was what Lucy Curtis had undertaken to do. She had no idea when she undertook it how hard it was. In a glow of determined generosity and good meaning towards the woman of whom, in her inmost soul, she felt jealous as receiving regard and attention to which she had no right, she had taken this Herculean task upon her shoulder—and now she would not shrink from it; but it was hard beyond all belief to carry it out. A hundred times a day the name of Nancy was trembling on her lips. Between her mother and herself, the conversation was not talking so much as thinking aloud. Everything was common between them, their thoughts, the occurrences of their life, their reading, their speculations—they did everything *à deux*, as even husband and wife cannot do, as perhaps only mother and daughter ever succeed in doing. The differences of character between them, the difference between Lady Curtis's experience, and those touches of

the world which inevitably in nearly fifty years of living modify the character, and Lucy's youthfulness of certainty—her stronger convictions and more absolute perceptions of good and evil—these gave the necessary tinge of individuality to their utterances. But there had never been any reserves between these two.

Thus when Lucy made up her mind to keep Durant's intimation of Nancy's near presence, to herself, she undertook a burden for which her strength was scarcely fit. To help herself to bear it, she said to herself, that she had as yet no certainty on the subject—that she was not sure that the woman Durant had seen was Mrs. Arthur; and that she herself having once seen her brother's wife did not recognise her now, though compelled by a hundred circumstances to believe that this was she. No, she said to herself, she had no legal warrant, no certainty sufficiently strong to justify her in disturbing the minds of her parents by a guess which, perhaps, might turn out mistaken. It would disturb their minds

greatly. Their kindly prepossession in favour of the stranger was not strong enough to bear such an interruption, and they would be entirely at a loss what to do; what Arthur would wish them to do; what would be most expedient in the painful circumstances. If Nancy was known to be Arthur's wife, she could not remain there without acknowledgment from Arthur's family; and how could they adopt her into their bosom when it was she who had separated from her husband, sent him away from her, ruined his life? She could not be at variance with her husband, and in friendship with his father and mother—parted from him, but received by them. No, that was impossible; and when nobody even knew whether it was Nancy! It might be quite another person whom Lewis had seen—it might be some one from Oakenden, the nearest town, come over for the day. It might be the clergyman's wife of the next parish, young Mrs. Brown, who was lately married and not much known in the neighbourhood. It might be—half a

dozen people—why should it be Mrs. Arthur of Wren Cottage? If this were, indeed, Nancy, the wife of Arthur Curtis, was it at all probable that she would have taken so transparent a disguise? All these arguments Lucy went over to herself, feeling that they were futile. In her own mind, she had no doubt that Mrs. Arthur at the Cottage was her sister-in-law, and that Lewis had seen her, and that she had fled from him. But these were simply ideas of her own, no more; and even if they were facts, and proved true, what end could be served by telling her mother —was it not better to wait, to see what might happen, to let events shape themselves? But oh! how hard—how much harder than anyone could have supposed it was!

Lady Curtis on her side was secretly grieved with her child. She did not make any complaint; she reasoned with herself indeed against the pain she felt, saying to herself that it was natural Lucy should be preoccupied, should talk less freely when they sat together, should have

less to say to her mother. Had she not another now for whom she would store up all those outflowings of the heart which had been her mother's alone? She was, she knew and humbly avowed to herself, ridiculously ready to be wounded, and felt the smallest little unconscious prick from those she loved; but she must be just to Lucy. There was nothing wanting in Lucy that any reasonable mother could wish for; but only they two had been all in all to each other, and Lady Curtis felt that to Lucy she was no longer all in all. Long silences would come between them while she worked at her crewels, and Lucy carried on the varied occupations of a young lady's afternoon, a young lady who is a parish sovereign, and has a great many small yet important public affairs on hand. Those silences Lady Curtis set down to Durant's account, and felt a something growing in her mind very different from her former affection for Lewis, which she endeavoured with all her might to crush, without finding it easy to do so. It was natural, and she must

be just; while all the time it was not Lewis that was in fault. Fortunately, Lucy herself did not even know that her mother had discovered her embarrassed self-consciousness, and had not the slightest notion that it was set down to the account of Lewis. And thus a little something, which was not so much as a cloud, a mist upon the clear sky, a fantastic vapour, but presaging storm and darkness, began to breathe between them. They were disappointed in each other; sympathy somehow seemed to fail between them. Was it that her mother was *exigeante*, Lucy asked herself—even—painful word—jealous? It was that Lucy had some one else to love, that she was no longer of first importance to her child, the mother thought; and the fact was that both were wrong, that it was neither jealousy on the one side nor desertion on the other, but Nancy—nothing but a secret, the most innocent of secrets, and the most well-intentioned, that did the wrong.

And the more her thoughts dwelt on this subject, and the more apparent it

became to Lucy's mind that she must not betray her discovery, the more curious she grew about the object of it all. Never a parish day came now that she did not pay a visit to Mrs. Arthur. This was not always successful, for Mrs. Arthur was often out, as Lucy thought, to avoid her; but on these occasions she would talk to the sister, whose name nobody knew. Lucy called her Miss Arthur, with a keen glance of scrutiny, and saw by Matilda's little start and her sudden look, as if about to contradict her, that this was not her name; but she thought better of it after a moment's consideration, and allowed herself to be called Miss Arthur for the rest of the interview. And Lucy had little difficulty in eliciting from Matilda all the particulars of her family history which did not touch Nancy. How their parents were dead, how their only brother had gone to New Zealand; and Matilda did not conceal that she hoped to follow Charley, and, indeed, to that intention was busy with all the chemises at which Lucy beheld her working.

"It will be a long voyage," Matilda said, "and one requires a large supply."

"But will your sister go too?"

"My sister? I have two sisters, Miss Curtis. One is very well married in the place where we used to live. I have heard them say that if Charley did very well, and there seemed a good opening, they wouldn't mind; for what is New Zealand nowadays?—not much farther than France used to be, father always liked to say."

"But I meant your sister here, Mrs. Arthur. Will it not be very dreary for her if you go away?"

"Oh, my sister, Mrs. Arthur! She is very different from the rest of us; things are not with her as with the rest of us. I cannot take it upon me to say what she will do."

While this conversation was going on, Lady Curtis, who had walked down the length of the avenue to look for Lucy, met Mrs. Arthur coming over the stile, and stopped to talk to her.

"I see you have got some lovely leaves again; are you going to draw them? You must have quite a genius for art-work."

"Oh, no, no genius for anything," said Nancy, with the swift flushes of sudden change going over her face which Lady Curtis always called forth. She was more at her ease when there was nobody looking on. She had the feeling that she must be supposed to be "currying favour" with Lady Curtis when there was a third person present. "No genius; it has been always my ruin that I am so stupid," said Nancy, with a serious air, which looked very piquant and amusing in conjunction with such words.

"Your ruin, my dear? I hope you are far from ruin anyhow; and I don't think it could possibly come on that score," said Lady Curtis, with a smile.

"Ah!" said Nancy, with her whole heart in the sigh that came from her red lips, "no one can tell another's troubles. I have had many; but they have all come because I was so stupid; though after I have said a wrong thing, I always feel that it is wrong, and know what I ought to have said; but it is too late then, it only makes it worse," she breathed forth with a long sighing breath.

"Well," said Lady Curtis, still smiling, "I don't know what wrong things you may have done; but that is the best that can happen to you, for you will remember next time to say, not the wrong thing, but the right."

"Ah!" said Nancy again, with great serious eyes; "but that is exactly what I cannot learn to do! It is not badness, it is stupidness. I make the same mistakes, and do the same faults, and speak as I ought not to speak."

"Poor girl!" said Lady Curtis, touched by the tears that came while Mrs. Arthur spoke. "This is a sad experience for you. I hope it is not so serious as you seem to think. I am a great deal older than you are," she went on, still more touched as a big tear fell, looking like a small ocean on Nancy's black sleeve, "and if I can help you, or give you any advice, I should be glad to do so. Our experience is not worth much unless we can help younger people with it; and though I do not know you, I take an interest in you."

"Oh, you are kind, very kind," cried

Nancy, a brilliant flush darting all over her face. "I never thought anyone could be so kind; but my troubles are all of my own bringing on," she added quickly; "and the worst is, I can't do anything. No, no one could do anything. Did you mean really you would like the pattern?—those poor natural things?" there was a wistful look in her eyes, but she tried to laugh, and shook off the tears, "they don't seem worth the attention of a lady like you."

"I am afraid you are a little goose," said Lady Curtis, patting Nancy's hand with her own. It was the only way she could show the sympathy which rose so warmly within her, she could scarcely tell why. "Nature is as much worth a queen's attention as a beggar's. And yes, indeed, I should like the pattern. Will you really make it for me? But you must come to the Hall and see my work; and Sir John wants very much to make your acquaintance. It was you, was it not, that opened the gate for him?"

"Yes." Another vivid flush covered

Nancy's face; she grew prettier and prettier as she grew thus animated, wavering from one emotion to another. This time it seemed all pleasure, warming her all over, and making her countenance glow.

"He has done nothing but rave about you ever since. I shall be jealous if you don't mind. Will you come to-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow," said Nancy, her face changing like a sunset sky. "Oh, Lady Curtis, you are too good to me. You don't know me—"

"No, not much; but everything must have a beginning," said the gracious lady. "We must settle upon a day. If not to-morrow, let it be Saturday. That will give you four days to make up your mind. You must come up early to luncheon, and Lucy and I will show you all there is to see. If you meet Lucy, will you tell her I am going slowly up the avenue waiting for her. She should be on her way home now."

Nancy went away with her head full of excitement, and a hundred conflicting

thoughts. She met Lucy at the corner of the village street, who looked at her with investigating eyes. Whom has she been talking to, to make her look so bright, yet so agitated? Lucy asked herself. Surely it could not be Bertie, who had passed but a little time before? The jealousy of a tiger suddenly sprang up in Lucy's mind. If this girl came here to conciliate the family, yet under their very eyes looked like *this*, because of the admiration of another man!

"Miss Curtis, I have just met——" (Nancy did not like to say "your mother," that seemed too familiar; and her ladyship, as Matilda said, was too like a servant) "Lady Curtis. She said I was to tell you that she was in the avenue waiting for you. She is very kind," said Nancy, with a little appealing look. "She said I was to come to the Hall. Does she really mean me to come, Miss Curtis? You will tell me true."

"Do you think my mother says what she does not mean?" cried Lucy, herself half-touched, half-angry; for she felt now

that she did not want to like this girl, whose secret she alone knew—and yet there was danger that she might be made to like her. The creature looked beautiful, something had inspired her. She had never looked so nearly beautiful before. "Of course she means you to come, what else could you suppose?"

"I did not know that—people were so kind," said Nancy, in a very low tone. The she looked at Lucy, half-wistful, half-suspicious. Lucy was not like the rest, there was a mixture of feelings in her which did not exist in the others, a complication of sentiment which Nancy divined, though she could not have told how. "I will come if you say so," she said.

"Then come," said Lucy, holding out her hand, with a sudden movement. "And good-bye. I must run, if my mother is waiting for me—" She hurried away for other reasons, too. It seemed to her as if she must say something, disclose her knowledge, encourage Nancy to win the favour of her father and mother

if she lingered a moment longer. "Is it because she is so pretty?" Lucy asked herself; "if I were a gentleman perhaps!" As a matter-of-fact, women are absurdly subject to this spell of beauty; but we have been taught to think that it is not so, and most people believe as they are taught; so Lucy supposed it must have been something else which moved her, and suddenly made her forget her prejudices. She hurried on after her mother, who was still lingering in the avenue. It was early afternoon still, but the short winter day was already waning.

"You are late," Lady Curtis said, when she came up. "I thought, as it gets dark so soon, I would come and meet you." This was one of the many little pathetic additions to her ordinary tender ways, which Lady Curtis made, partially unawares, to conciliate her child.

"Thank you, mamma. I met Mrs. Arthur, and she told me you were here."

"Yes, I met her, too; how pretty she is! and she made me such curious pretty speeches. Is it humility, is it pride? I

cannot understand. I think that young woman must have a history."

"I suppose most people have," said Lucy.

"You know what I mean," said Lady Curtis. "She took to telling me about her faults, poor thing, *àpropos de bottes*. It was quite uncalled for—but confidence, whoever it may be that gives it, is always touching. I suppose it feels like a compliment. It is always complimentary when people trust in you." Here she gave her daughter's arm a little soft pressure. Lucy felt it, but misunderstood it, as was natural. It felt the very softest tenderest of reproaches for something withheld; but Lucy understood one thing and Lady Curtis meant quite another. Therefore now they came to an understanding, though still a mistaken one. "If I ever keep anything from you, mamma," she cried, "it is only because—because—"

"My darling," said the mother, holding her child's arm close within her own. "Do you think I don't understand?" and she gave a little sigh.

What was it she did or did not under-

stand? Lucy was wholly puzzled; and then they fell to talking of other things; of the parish, and how many flannel-petticoats and pairs of blankets should be ordered for Christmas; and about the little cookery school, which was Lucy's present hobby—how nicely Annie Bird, the model girl, made the soup for the sick; and then changing from that—wondered when Arthur's next letter would come, and told each other that they did not like the tone of the last one. Poor Arthur! would it be possible to have him home for Christmas. Surely Lady Curtis said, he did not intend to stay permanently out of England because of that dreadful wife of his. That would be hard indeed upon his own family, who loved him. And thus they beguiled the way up the darkling avenue, with their faces turned towards the lights of home. Oh, if Arthur would only come home! There at least he would find nothing but tenderness, not a word to cross him, poor fellow! nothing to put him in mind of the wife who had made a waste and wilderness of his life.

While her mother spoke so it may be supposed how Lucy trembled—so much that at last Lady Curtis took note of it, and asked in some alarm what was the matter, did she think she had taken cold? did she feel ill? No, Lucy said, hurrying on, she had taken no cold; but she was chilly, she had felt it all the afternoon; and then Lady Curtis hurried her into the warm blaze of the morning room, and to the warm tea, which Sir John came in to share, almost as soon as they got indoors. He thought it was very cold, too, seasonable weather, such as ought to herald Christmas; then he heard the little budget of news. He was delighted to hear of Annie Bird's proficiency with the soup, and still more delighted that the lady of the gate, the pretty stranger, was coming on Saturday. The one fact was not much more important than the other in the old man's eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

NANCY went very quickly along the village street; the red brown leaves were dropping from her hands; she had forgotten them; her mind was full of excitement, and her eyes of light and life. If Arthur could have seen her at that moment, he who was just now arriving in England, full of anxious thoughts about her, thinking of her as perhaps in want, certainly in poverty, struggling against adverse fate, he would scarcely have known his wife. Never during all the time he had known her had Nancy looked so brilliantly vigorous, and indeed happy. She was happy in a way, happy in the stir of living that was in her mind, the sense of an emergency that would call forth all

her powers, and that potential consciousness of active existence which is sometimes better even than happiness. All her faculties were in vigorous exercise, her mind was busy with plans and thoughts. She had that to encounter which might have made the bravest woman in her circumstances quail; but it only strung her nerves, and made her feel the strength within her tingling to her very finger-points. Rash, impulsive, hot-headed she was, as she had always been, but the jar and twist of unhappy pride, of false position, of conscious ignorance and inferiority, and struggling self-assertion were gone. She went rapidly up the village between the rows of cottages, with their little lamps lighted, and past the glow which Mrs. Rolt's window threw out into the evening. The Rector and the Doctor were going to dine with Cousin Julia that night, and the table was already laid, and showed its modest grandeur frankly to the gazers outside, who thought it very fine indeed. Mrs. Rolt had asked Nancy to that dinner, and though she had declined to go she

cast a glance through the wire blinds at the lighted interior and the laid out table, with a pleasant consciousness that she might have been there had she pleased. And then she went across to the Wren Cottage, where Matilda, more careful than Mrs. Rolt, had drawn down the blinds when she lit the lamp. She was seated as usual at her chemises ; but she was not so comfortable as usual, for she had been beguiled into telling Miss Curtis a good deal about the family, and had mentioned the name of Underhayes, and that of Nancy—all things which in the code of private instructions drawn out for her when she came here, were accounted capital crimes. But Matilda did not feel that she was called upon to disclose these errors. She was, however, "talkative and unconciliatory," very willing to hear of the encounters Nancy might have had, and to give an account, with reserves, of her own. Nancy came in, opening the door which opened innocently from the outside, as is the way in most country places. She threw herself down in the first chair she

came to, and put down her leaves ("nasty wet rubbish, enough to give her her death of cold") upon the table on which Matilda already, though it was too early to have it, yet for the sake of cheerfulness, had set out the tea. And then Nancy looked straight into the lamp, with eyes that seemed to give out as much light, so brilliant, so shining, that Matilda, though so familiar with them, was struck with surprise.

"How can you stare into the light so, Nancy?" she said, "you will ruin your eyes."

"Shall I? it does not hurt them."

"It is all very well to say that now; but wait till you are older. Mother used to say there was nothing so bad. Ah, Nancy, you have taken things into your own hands—dear old mother's rules don't count for much now."

"Indeed they do," cried Nancy, with sudden tears; "indeed they do, and will whatever happens! I am not unfaithful. Those that I love, if I love them once, I love them for ever—dead or alive."

"Ah!" said Matilda, with a tone of interrogation in her voice. It was not clear what she was thinking of; but Nancy's quick temper and restless spirit divined at once.

"You mean Arthur? Well then, and I mean it too. All the same I do. I mayn't have just shown it—always: but I do mean it—and will, if I should live a hundred years."

"I wonder at you, Nancy! Why don't you write then and tell him? I never knew whether you did or didn't till this moment—and it looked a great deal more like didn't. He thought so, I'm sure."

"Could I give you the sense to see, either to him or you?" cried Nancy, with quick scorn. She did not know that Dr. Johnson had declared it impossible to furnish understanding. And then she threw up her arms with a sudden fine gesture, tossing down the red brown winterly leaves, and shaking the tea-table with its load. "Oh, what am I to do?" she cried, "what am I to do? I am going to the Hall on Saturday; they want me to go,

they have all asked me to go; and Lady Curtis called me, my dear. But she didn't know who I was. And I am deceiving them, Matty. It is the same as telling a lie. I have done a great many wicked things," said Nancy, "but I never told a lie. How am I to go and sit at their table, and look in their faces, and all the time it will be a lie?"

"What will be a lie?" said sober-minded Matilda. "You don't need to say anything that isn't true. It is not as if you had changed your name. You are Mrs. Arthur, and you would be Mrs. Arthur whatever happened. I do believe Miss Lucy suspects something; she has a way of taking things so quietly as if nothing was new to her. And anyhow, if the very worst should come to the worst, why, you're not compelled to go."

"But I will go," said Nancy, with flashing eyes. "Oh, just to be there, to see it all, to know just where he would have taken me, where I might have lived if I hadn't been a ——. I will go! I have made up my mind to that. She called me, my dear—did I tell you she called me my

dear? and said old Sir John had raved about me; and begged me to go." The vivid blush of pleasure came back to Nancy's face as she spoke, and her eyes again blazed, opposite the lamp, like rival yet reflecting lights. A vague smile came upon her face; there was a little vanity in it, pleased satisfaction with the conquests she had made. Then a cloud came suddenly over it. "But all the same it will be cheating, oh, it will be cheating, Matty! I won't give it up; but you may begin to pack the boxes," said Nancy, suddenly. "After I have been there, I shall have to tell them everything, and we must go away."

"Go away! I think you are out of your senses, Nancy. We have just paid the second month in advance, and they will never give it back; and consider how expensive it is travelling with so much luggage—everything we have in the world. I thought," said Matilda, aggrieved, "that we should at least have stayed here, now that we are here, till something was settled, till you had made up your mind one way or other."

"I have made up my mind. When we came here I never thought they would take any notice of us. Why should they have taken any notice of us—a couple of poor girls in a small cottage, not knowing anyone? I wanted just to see what kind of people they were, that was all," said Nancy, earnestly. "I never thought of anything more. Why should they have thought of us at all? We were quite out of their way."

"Well," said Matilda, to whom it appeared that here was a good opportunity of showing her own superior judgment, "that was because you thought they were not very nice people. You made up your mind about them before you knew them. But they *are* nice people. I never wish to see a more kind lady than her ladyship is."

"Matty, dear, I don't mean to be nasty; but if you would say Lady Curtis, not her ladyship—remember that she is my mother-in-law."

Once more that vivid blush, too bright for anything but pleasure, came over Nancy's face. How much scorn, how

much defiance, what attempts at insult she had lavished upon Lady Curtis's name; but Arthur's mother had called her my dear, had looked at her kindly with soft eyes; and it had come to pass, by some subtle process, that Nancy felt herself to belong to this soft-eyed lady more than she did to good honest Matilda, who had stood by her so stoutly, but who naturally retained the manners of her class, which was not Nancy's class any more.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Matilda. "She's not *my* mother-in-law. She's very kind, but she's a deal superior to me; and I'll speak respectful, whatever you think. They *are* nice people, as I was saying. Miss Lucy is what I call a perfect lady;" (this, too, jarred upon Nancy's new-born fastidiousness; but she did not venture to hint that Miss Curtis would be more correct) "and when they saw two young women by themselves, like you and me, of course they took notice. In their own village, these sort of folks are like kings and queens," said Matilda; "everything belongs to them. It's not like just being

better off. I understand the feeling myself; it's like what mother used to have for the poor things in the court, to see they went on all straight and sent their children to school, and so forth. Mother was not a great lady, but she was known in the place, and took a charge like; and she was a good woman. There's a kind of a likeness in good folks," said Matilda, turning away her head. The mother's loss was still recent, and made their eyes wet unawares when they spoke of her; but this time Nancy was too much preoccupied to enter into the allusion. Her own thoughts surged up and deadened her appreciation of what her sister said; though Matilda's ideas, if not brilliant, were often the most sensible of the two.

"Yes," said Nancy, after a pause; "that's how it must be. I don't want to leave this little place. I like it; I think I like the country. It may be dull, but it's nice."

"Very nice," said Matilda, looking at her seventh chemise affectionately as she finished the trimming and folded it up,

giving little pats of satisfaction to each fold, "when you have anything you want to get done with. I should have taken twice the time to do my things if we had stayed at Underhayes."

"But we must go," said Nancy, continuing. "We might have stayed on if they had taken no notice, if we had kept ourselves shut up, and not seen them; but it can't be helped now. I will go to the Hall, just to see everything. Fancy sitting down at table with them, being like one of them! It will feel like a dream. Oh, I must, I must go just once! If ever Arthur should come back again—"

"Of course Arthur will come back again. If you tell them who you are, as you say you will, Arthur will come first train; and do you think nowadays that folks can hide themselves like they used to do in the story-books, Nancy? You may run away as much as you like, they'll have you back again. They will set the detectives after you. Them that have far greater reason to hide than you have get found out, and do you think you can keep safe?

Nonsense! Once tell them, and you'll soon be fetched back."

"Never!" cried Nancy. "Against my will, with detectives sent after me? I will go to New Zealand first with you, or anywhere. Never! It is not forcing that will ever hold me."

"I believe there is nothing silly you wouldn't do, if it came to that," said Matilda, shaking her head. It was an unwise suggestion she had made; but after a while Nancy calmed down, and gathered up her leaves again, and proceeded to arrange them as was her custom. She had altogether given up the beautiful chalk cartoon which Matilda admired, for this rubbish. How silly it was, her sister thought; though, indeed, her ladyship was to blame, who had encouraged Nancy in this nonsensical occupation. "What is going to be the good of all that?" she asked at last, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "You can't frame it and put it up on the wall, to make a room look nice. It's only lumber, and gathers dust."

"I am drawing something for Lady

Curtis to work," said Nancy, with some solemnity. "When I go into the house the first time, I shall take something with me *to give her*. I suppose you will say that is silly too, but I like to do it. *She* thinks they are good for something. She was quite interested, you know. Did I tell you, Matilda, she called me, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, you told me, sure enough," said Matilda, with a little impatience, "three times over;" and she got up to put away the seventh chemise along with the others. It was trimmed with her own work, nice little scallops worked in button-hole stitch, with three holes in each curve, very neat and strong; and she was pleased, at once with the feeling of successful production and personal property. She gave the little heap another affectionate pat as she laid this one on the top. Seven new chemises, every stitch of which would bear inspection! Matilda felt that she had justification for a little pride. She did not sit down again to begin another, but put on the kettle, that it might come to the point of perfect boiling before she made the tea;

and it was pleasant to see her moving about in the pleasant firelight, her substantial and round, but neat person, clothed in a black and white gown, her brown hair smooth and shining. Matilda was very particular about the due amount of crape on her Sunday dress, and you may be sure would not put off her mourning a day sooner than the most rigid rule allowed. But in the house, with all her little domestic occupations, she thought the black and white best. "For crape goes if you look at it, and black so soon gets rusty," she said. It looked more natural, as well as more cheerful and pleasant that the fire should have something to brighten upon and throw ruddy tints over; and it was comfortable to see her make the tea. What a lucky New Zealander that man would be who got Matilda, with all her nicely trimmed chemises, for his wife!

But with Nancy, poor Nancy! it was altogether another affair. It is a rash thing to come out of the world in which you were born. She had done it unintentionally, vowing with vehement asser-

verations that nothing would change her. And how she had struggled against all poor Arthur's attempts! how she had clung, as it were, with clutching of desperate hands to the fabric of her original home! Those very corrections which she made in Matilda's honest diction, had she not hotly resented them, fiercely refused them when Arthur had tried to suggest them to herself? But all that was changed. Nancy had drifted away from her own world—drifted into his; if she clutched at anything now, it was not at her old ark, but at the slippery rocks and sands of the other hemisphere on which she had been cast ashore. Falling upon it in her first footing, she had secretly kissed the soil as conquering invaders have done to avert the evil omen. She belonged no longer to that old universe which had been buried with the father and mother, the last lingering traces of which were to be carried away in Matilda's trunks along with her careful outfit; but the other world had not yet received the trembling unavowed neo-

phyte. Even now, rather than be brought into it by any formal force, by sense of duty, by the necessity laid upon her husband and his family, or by their pity, or by anything that could be construed into either, Nancy would have kept her wild word, and rushed away into the distant wilds with her sister. Had there been a word, or thought, of "arrangement," of negotiation, even of right on the other side to claim her, or of right on her side to a certain place as Arthur's wife, no request, no persuasion would have induced Nancy to accept what was thus settled for her. She did not even know what she would accept as a solution of the difficulty—even Arthur, did he stand before holding out his arms to her, might by some chance glance, some inadvertent word, turn her from him instead of bringing her to him. Her mind was still high-fantastical, though changed in so many other ways. But all that had happened since she came to Oakley had chimed in with her humour. The advances she had made in knowledge of her hus-

band's surroundings, and in the favour of his family had been of a kind that pleased and flattered her. The Curtises had been aware of no reason for modifying their criticism of her, or pretending to a liking they did not feel; but they had all "taken to" Nancy; and Lady Curtis had called her "my dear!" How haughtily would she have rejected that expression of kindness had it been applied to Arthur's wife in the old days; but as given to the young stranger at Oakley, whose looks and ways had attracted my Lady, it was sweet. Yes! she had attracted them, she herself, not anything outside of her. Lucy—Lucy, indeed, had made doubtful response; but Sir John had "raved about her," and Lady Curtis called her my dear! These thoughts made Nancy's countenance glow.

And the three intervening days passed quickly in the excitement that possessed her; everybody seemed to know that she was going to the Hall on Saturday. The Doctor's wife, who had kept aloof "till she saw what other people were going to do,"

called at the door in her husband's phaeton, and left a stately card, which seemed to Matilda, when it was brought to her, much more impressive than Lady Curtis's. And kind Mrs. Rolt ran over twice a day at least, and asked what she was going to wear. "If it is wet, Sam shall drive you there, before he goes to Oakenden," she said. She was as fussy about it as if Lady Curtis had been the Queen; and, indeed, she was the Queen of the district, and made the laws for the neighbourhood.

"You will have everybody coming to see you now," said Cousin Julia. "When Lady Curtis calls on anyone, everybody goes. Yes, it is silly perhaps; but then we think a great deal of Lady Curtis, my dear. She is very amiable, and so clever. Did you ever hear that she sometimes writes for the Reviews? She does indeed; and one must have real genius, you know, to do that; not like little bits of newspapers. And people must have some sort of rule—some will not call unless they have an introduction, and some will call on everybody. But we

make Lady Curtis our rule. If she goes, we all go."

"You did not wait till Lady Curtis came," said Nancy gratefully.

"Oh, no! I don't think I could have done it. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you my dear. I told Lucy of it directly. *So* pretty, I said, (as you are, though people don't generally say it to your face like me), and quite a lady. 'Then, of course you should call. I wonder you did not call instantly,' said Lucy; and I did not lose much time, did I, Mrs. Arthur? Then, of course, I was dying to know who you were."

"You are very—very kind; but how could you know who I am? I am nobody," said Nancy with a smile; and then she added impulsively, "but I am so glad you thought me—a lady." When these unadvised words were out of her mouth, Nancy changed colour, and grew defiant. But her horror at her own mistake was entirely turned away by Cousin Julia's soft disposition, which was well fitted to be a buckler against wrath.

"As if there could be any doubt of

that!" she said, "Lady Curtis says you have such pretty manners, and Sir John! Sir John is really not himself. He thought you must be young Seymour's wife, whom I was telling you of, who made such an admirable marriage. He married one of the Glencoe family, quite a near relative of the Earl, the most unexceptionable delightful match. How we all thought of poor Arthur when young Seymour was married! But I told Sir John (now you must not be vain, my dear, but of course one must say what one thinks) I told Sir John you were a great deal prettier than Mrs. Henry Seymour; not quite so tall perhaps, but *much* prettier. What is the matter, my dear, you turn white and you turn red?"

Here Nancy confounded her sister, who was present, and bewildered herself, and won Mrs. Rolt's tenderest sympathies by telling the merest simple truth. "When you speak of Arthur," she said, "you make me think of my husband; and—I can't help it!" she said, putting her head down on Cousin Julia's kind shoulder and bursting into a passion of tears. How

touched and interested and gratified that good woman was! She insisted on taking Nancy upstairs and making her lie down for a little. "You poor dear child!" she said, longing to ask a thousand questions, but heroically refraining; "but you must rest a little, and get back your pretty looks. You must not look pale to-morrow. I want you to look your best to-morrow." But when she came down stairs again, it was not in human nature not to make an effort to get something out of Matilda. "She never said anything to me about her husband before," said Mrs. Rolt. "It would do her good to talk a little, not to shut up everything in her own heart, poor dear. Is it long since?" she asked delicately. She did not know what it was, whether death or separation. The question had to be put vaguely, and Cousin Julia had a consciousness that she had put it in a very successful way.

"She will tell you herself," said Matilda. "She does not like other people to talk about it," and she opened the door with great alacrity that the visitor might go away.

CHAPTER XIV.

ARTHUR went to Durant's chambers again next morning, with a forlorn hope that something or other might have brought his friend back, without whom, it appeared to him, that he did not know what measures to take. Durant had held the keys of his fortune one way or another, and could guide him with the right thing to do, the right way to set about everything. He had never doubted that Durant would be in town, and would help him, and the first sensation in his mind was one of irritation mingled with disappointment. Of course, the only thing to be done, failing Durant, was to go to Underhayes, where he knew his friend had already gone without success. But what else was there to do, what other clew was there? At the

great railway-station, where he got the train to Underhayes, it was his bad fortune to meet again with Denham, whom he had seen not very long ago in Vienna. Arthur gnashed his teeth at sight of this butterfly fluttering in his way again, no doubt to disturb his mind with some foolish buzz or other—and did his best to avoid him; but he was not a man to be avoided. He came forward with all his usual warmth of friendliness and surprise to see the other in England.

"You here, Curtis!" he said.

"You always say, 'you here,' whenever we meet," said Arthur, half-annoyed, half-amused, remembering so clearly the greeting which this man had given him at Paris, in the Bois. Denham was the first of his own world whom Nancy had met, and how many little mistakes and disagreements, quarrels which looked so ridiculously causeless at this distance, which might have been so easily avoided, yet which raised such rapid pulses then in their foolish young bosoms—had arisen while they were meeting him, going to the

theatre with him, or resisting his invitations; for after all he had always been friendly, and had tried to please the bride, hard though she was to please.

"Yes, you always turn up so unexpectedly, just when one thinks you a hundred miles off. The other day you were in Vienna, and you said nothing of coming here."

"And you were the other day in Vienna, and said nothing of coming here."

"Of course, we are both the Queen's servants," said Denham; "and public business, eh? consumes a great deal of our time. But do you know, Curtis, I wanted to see you. I hope I did not lead you into delusion? I told you I thought I met Mrs. Curtis on the other side of the water."

"Yes;" Arthur's tone was curt and sharp; he had no intention of listening to anything about Nancy, as if it was news to him, and yet he knew so little, and would have been so thankful to hear anything from anybody! His voice sounded harsh and peremptory in its agitation.

"Meaning no offence," said Denham, with a scrap of mock humility; "but I find I made a mistake. It was at one of the stations on this line I met Mrs. Curtis, that was my blunder. I forgot till I came here to-day, when it suddenly flashed across me, that it was here or somewhere near. I hope I have not caused you any anxiety."

"Not at all," said Arthur, with a blank countenance, which his diplomatic experience had taught him to wear when he chose; but then Denham was a brother of the trade, and it was scarcely worth while wasting it on him. "My—wife's family lived near. It is very natural that you should have met her hereabouts. I thought it a mistake, you may remember."

"Ah, did you? I did not recollect. I thought I might have been giving you deluding information. I hope you have good reports?"

He did not know what to say. He was a dealer in gossip, and would have given much to hear the full details of this separation, especially now when he was on the

verge of half-a-dozen country houses; but at the same time he did not want to worry the man whom he was sorry for, by betraying his partial knowledge of the facts. He had made a great deal of Nancy in Paris, betraying her peculiarities, her ignorance to many admiring listeners, and he would have liked a second chapter, which probably would have amused society still more. But he did not want to affront Arthur or wound his feelings. What could he say? ought he to make believe that he had never heard anything? or delicately that there was a something, a mist of report, which he knew?

"Perfectly," said Arthur, with cold self-restraint. "I am going to her now. Her mother, to whom she was much attached, is lately dead."

"Oh, really!" said Denham; and he watched the young man's face with keen scrutiny. Fortunately, he himself was not going by the train which went to Underhayes. He accompanied Arthur to the door of his carriage, and stood there talking. "My *hommages* to Mrs. Curtis,"

he said, "I daresay she has forgotten me; but lay me at her feet, Curtis, all the same. One does not easily forget a face like hers; you won't mind me saying so much?"

"Oh no—surely not;" said Arthur, smiling. He put himself into a corner of the train, glad to escape the other's eyes. No, there were not many such faces as hers. Then, all suddenly, her aspect as she sat in the little Victoria in the Bois, that cold bright winter day, came up before him, he could not tell how; how bright she had looked! no wonder that Denham said one did not easily forget such a face. Her husband had been trying to forget it for two years, and now, the moment he had suspended that effort, how it came back! And where was she, where was he to find her? How slowly the train seemed to go! Might she be visible perhaps somewhere on one of the crowded railway platforms which they passed, where Denham had seen her? He gazed out anxiously whenever they stopped. Why should it be Denham, Denham! who cared nothing about her, that had seen her, and not

Arthur, to whom such a meeting would have been new life ? This was what was called providential; but what strange mistakes—mistakes that the poorest clerk in an office would be discharged if he made—were set down to Providence. If *he* had but met her, and not Denham, what trouble might have been spared !

It was about noon when he reached Underhayes; and he went direct, remembering what Durant had written, to the shop of Raisins, the grocer. Sarah Jane was dusting her drawing-room, when her maid brought her word that a gentleman wanted to see her. It was her pleasure, and not necessity (she liked people to know this), that made her dust the drawing-room herself. Servants were negligent, they chipped the china ornaments, and were not half particular enough about the gilding; but Sarah Jane had nearly completed this self-imposed task. She put down the long feather brush which she had been using in a corner, and took off her housemaid's gloves.

"Show the gentleman in," she said,

with some grandeur; but when she saw who it was, Sarah Jane screamed out with surprise and excitement. "Arthur!" she cried. She was almost as much startled as if he had come back from the dead.

"Where is Nancy?" he said. He had got into such a state of excitement now that he forgot all preliminaries, and plunged at once into the subject which interested himself.

"Nancy? Oh, Arthur, wait a bit, I am so startled. You made my heart jump! Whoever thought of seeing you here?"

"It is not so very wonderful to see me when you reflect that my wife has been here for years. Where is she? You used to be kind and sympathetic, Sarah Jane. Tell me where my wife is! Where is Nancy? There can be no reason why I should not know."

"Oh, it is so nice to see you again," said Sarah Jane. "Such a long time you have been away, two years and a half. It is a long time. Oh, how I wish Nancy was here! I tried all I could to make her write to you when poor mother died. But she was always so self-willed, you know."

"Where is she?" said Arthur. He went up to Sarah Jane and grasped her by the arm. He was beginning to lose the little self-control he had, and his very eyes were dim with the heat of his excitement. It is impossible to believe that he really hurt her, but it pleased her to assume that he did, which came to much the same thing.

"Oh, you monster!" cried Sarah Jane. "Oh, you savage! If that is how you used poor Nancy, I don't wonder she wouldn't take any notice. Let go, or I'll call my husband. Oh, my arm! I am sure it is black and blue."

"Pardon me, pardon me!" said poor Arthur. "I did not mean to hurt you, God knows; but I am almost out of my senses. My good girl, tell me where she is. I have been travelling night and day. If I am impatient, you must forgive me. Tell me, where is my wife?"

"Oh, Arthur, I am so sorry. I never thought you would take on so. Nancy might be very proud if she saw you like that. I never thought a man would mind so much, they take things so easy. Raisins

never would. If I were to go and leave him, I'm sure he'd let me. Oh, don't you be afraid, I ain't so silly as to try."

Arthur had to make a violent effort to restrain himself; but it was clear she must be treated with in a more cunning way.

"Will you answer me a simple question? Do you know where Nancy is?" he said; then with truer policy, "I will hear all about Raisins and yourself after, and you must tell me what you will like for a wedding present."

"Oh, Arthur, how kind you are! I always said you were nice. Oh, anything that *you* like, I am sure! You would be sure to choose something delightful; and we are brother and sister, ain't we, Arthur? I must give you a kiss to thank you," said Sarah Jane.

There was no harm in the kiss, and Arthur accepted it meekly. He drew a little further off when it was over, but took her hand and held it fast.

"All that afterwards," he said. "You may be sure I will do all I can to please you. But tell me first, tell me now, do

you know where she is? I must hear this first. You can't tell me unless you know."

"That is just it," said Sarah Jane. "Of course, I should have told you directly. They promised to write, but they never wrote but once."

"What does *they* mean? Who was with her, and where was the letter from?"

"Don't hold me so fast, you frighten me," cried Sarah Jane. "It was Matilda that was with her. Charley has gone to New Zealand, and Matilda is going after him; and Raisins and me, we don't know whether we mayn't follow. Don't crush my hand like that, Arthur, you hurt me. There was no date to the letter. No, I can't say that I expected to hear again just yet; five weeks, it is not so very long."

"And did not you want to write? You might have wished to see your sister again."

"In five weeks, and me married?" said Sarah Jane naïvely, "Oh, no; I knew they'd write when they wanted me, and what should I want them for? When

you're in trouble, it's natural you should think of your friends; but when you're doing very nicely, and quite happy, what do you want with them? But, Arthur, to show you I'm speaking true, I'll fetch you the letter, if you will let me go; and then if you can make anything out of it—let me go, Arthur. I promise I'll bring you the letter. Oh, please, I can't tell you any more. Let me go!"

When he did so, which he was half afraid of doing, she kept her word, and produced out of a gay little desk, lined with red, a crumpled note, with the marks of greasy fingers upon it, the sight of which gave Arthur, poor fellow, a sickening sensation. Small feelings so mingle with great that the thought that such a greasy scrap was a relic of his wife gave him as distinct a pang as if some great disappointment had happened to him. A lover, such as he felt himself still to be, ought to have been ready to take to his lips or his heart the meanest message that came from the beloved; but this gave him a feeling of disgust. And yet how he loved Nancy, and how his

heart struggled and throbbed at the idea of finding some trace of her. It was at once a relief and a terrible disappointment to find that the greasy letter was not from Nancy at all, but from Matilda, though, as it was the fingers of Mr. Raisins and the pocket of his bride which had produced the stains upon the letter, Nancy's own autograph might have been in precisely the same condition, unprotected by the divinity that should hedge a woman beloved.

"I don't know where she means to settle, nor what we're going to do," wrote Matilda. "She's always the same hoity-toity creature as ever. She talks about a house she has heard of somewhere right in the country. I can't tell you any more; but I'll write again; and in the meantime you'll be glad to hear that I've got some very nice calico, and begun my outfit."

This was all.

"She *is* so taken up about her outfit," said Sarah Jane. "You would think nobody had ever got such a thing before. But poor Matilda was always old-maidish in her ways. Lord, Arthur! what's the

matter? Have you found out anything? What a turn you did give me, to be sure!" cried Sarah Jane.

It was something which gave Arthur "a turn" too, as far as that effect can be produced upon a male subject. It was simply the postmark "Oakenden" on the envelope of the letter. He had not seen it before, nor looked for it, being too anxious for the information inside. It startled him beyond measure now. "Oakenden!" he repeated to himself as in a dream. Something more than chance, some design which he could not fathom, some vague trembling of meaning not yet comprehensible, but tending towards light, seemed to flicker through the word. It was the post-town of *home*. He knew it as well as he knew the village at his father's park gates. What had taken her there of all places in the world?

"Thank you," he said, speaking, he felt, out of a mist of vague wonder and dawning hope that seemed to envelope him in an atmosphere of his own. "Thank you; I think this will be of some use. I

know the place. Good-bye. I must go directly and see if they are there."

"Stop a moment," said Sarah Jane. "Stop and have some dinner with us. Raisins would like to see you, and—where is the place, Arthur? I should like to know too, for one never knows what may happen, and they are two lone women with nobody to look after them. It is so different when there is a man."

"I will let you know when I have found them," said Arthur. "Good-bye, I cannot wait longer now."

"But, Arthur, do stop and have some dinner! Look here," said Sarah Jane, getting between him and the door, "do you mean to take her back? Is that what you mean?"

"Take her back?" he said, with a half groan. "Was it I who sent her away?"

"For look here," said Sarah Jane, "I don't say you haven't a right to be angry. Raisins would not stand the half, no, nor a tenth part from me what you stood from Nancy. But she's not the same now. She's that proud she'll never let you see it

if she can help it; but she's very changed. She can't live with her own folks now. Her and me are not such friends as we were because of that; but I suppose it will please you. She's taken to study and so forth, and she don't find her own folks good enough company. She'll be all for us, I shouldn't wonder, the moment she sees you; but don't you believe her, Arthur. It was all she could do to keep one of us as long as poor mother lived. She's as changed as possible. She's a lady, that's what she is nowadays," said Sarah Jane.

Arthur only partially heard this long speech; he had no patience with it. He watched the door, and seized his opportunity, when Sarah Jane had ended her peroration, to hasten away, waving his hand to her.

"Well, I'm sure!" she said, as he darted down the stairs; and Mr. Raisins made many jokes at dinner upon the folly of the man who left a slice of "*that* beef" to run after a rebellious wife.

"She should stay where she was if I

had her in hand," said the grocer, not without an idea that the example was a dangerous one for Sarah Jane. "You wouldn't find me leaving my dinner for her, a woman as had given me up." He did not mean that his wife should entertain any delusions on this respect. Whatever "swells" might be, grocers were not such fools.

Arthur rushed direct to the railway without losing a moment. He did not make a pilgrimage to the Bates' house, as Durant had done; he brushed past the old haircloth sofa standing out exposed to rain and damp at the broker's door, and was not conscious of its existence. There was a train about to start, that was all he knew. When he got back to London he drove, without losing a moment, to the other railway, and went off at the earliest possible moment to Oakenden. He arrived there late in the afternoon, with nothing, not so much as a bag, remembering nothing beyond the fact that Nancy had been there. But what could he do when he got there? He did not know how to find such a needle

in that bottle of hay. The town was not large, but it was bustling and busy. It had new streets even since Arthur left home; and through what weary labour must he go before he could find the two, who might have veiled themselves in any one of five hundred new little brick houses? He took a rapid walk through the new streets in the dusk of the evening, gazing at all the parlour windows. It was not likely that fortune would answer his appeal by bringing Nancy to look out just at the moment he passed. Such a thing might happen to Denham, who had nothing to do with it, but not to him, to whom it was everything. If he had been seeking a criminal there might have been hope for him, or had he been in one of the blessed countries where everybody has *ses papiers*. Why has not everybody *ses papiers* in England? Arthur was ready, in the heat of his feelings, to give up his birthright if that might have helped him to find his wife.

At last he bethought himself of the post office, and pulling his hat down over his

brows, and his coat-collar up over his chin, he betook himself there to see if he could find any clue. Curtis? Oh, yes, there were the Curtises of Oakley, Sir John and her ladyship, the best known people in the county; and the Reverend Hubert at the Rectory, and old Miss Curtis at Oakley Dene. In the town? Well, yes, there was a Mrs. Curtis in Acorn Terrace, No. 12; hadn't been there long; did not get very many letters. "Yes, probably that is the lady," said Arthur, his heart beating loudly. He went off without a moment's hesitation to the little new brick terrace. It seemed to him that there could now be no doubt on the subject. He knew that Nancy would not take a false name. How unconscious she must be who was coming to her through the night—for it was quite dark now, the lamps lighted, the parlour windows shining. There was bright firelight in the window of No. 12, Acorn Terrace, and the sound of a piano, and some one singing. Could it be *her?* He knocked, his heart sounding louder than any knocker, and was admitted with inno-

cent confidence. Yes, Mrs. Curtis was at home; and the maid had prepared the lamp, which she carried in before him, announcing simply, "A gentleman, please, Ma'am." The inhabitants made Arthur out before he made them out, and a mild old lady in a widow's cap rose from a chair by the fire. What could Arthur do but stammer forth apologies, his very voice choked with disappointment. "I beg a thousand pardons, it is a mistake," he said, rushing out again, leaving the ladies in the parlour half angry, half interested. What a blank of helplessness he felt closing round him as he got outside again, hot with shame, and quivering with the shock of his disappointment. This was no use it was evident, and where could he go to inquire further? Not to the police, as if his innocent wife had been a culprit. He could not subject Nancy to that indignity. He walked about the streets for an hour or two longer, wondering what he could do. A directory? Her name would not be in it. The post-office had failed him; and he could not go calling her name

through the streets as the Eastern princess did. Nancy! Nancy! He might make it echo to all the four winds, but what would that do for him? It occurred to him at last to try the hotels, as he remembered the date of Matilda's letter; but no ladies bearing the names of Mrs. Curtis and Miss Bates had been heard of anywhere. At one of the hotels (probably at all) they recognised him, and as he was by this time prostrate with exhaustion and disappointment, he decided to remain all night, telegraphing to his servant to meet him there next day. He must go home now that he was so near; not to-night, but to-morrow, when he was more fit to meet strangers. Strangers! his own father and mother, his familiar friends, the servants who had nursed him from his childhood and loved him all his life; but a preoccupied mind is always unnatural. They were as strangers to him now.

CHAPTER XV.

SATURDAY morning! very bright but cold, a sprinkling of snow on the ground, crisp and slight like a permanent hoar frost, the trees all frosted, too, with edges of white, like the lights in a snow-landscape. Nancy in her blackness came out doubly distinct upon this white background, the long sweeping line of her simple dress and cloak, her face all glowing with animation and health, and repressed excitement. Pleasure, yet pain, a happy sense of having pleased, an eager wistful longing to please more, were all mingled with the feeling that she stood on the edge of an abyss, and that nothing

could excuse this deception, except the fact that it was for once, only for once, and that when that was over, all should be told. She kissed her sister as she went out, which was very unusual for her. "Think of me, till I come back," she said. Nancy felt that as yet there had been no more desperate moment in her life. She was not afraid of it, and yet she was all one pulsation, all one throb. She could scarcely speak to the people she met on the road, but nodded, with a wistful sense of friendliness. If they were all to think kindly of her, would not that support her in the present trial, and those that were still harder that must come after? For after she had done this, all would be over, there would be no more excuse for staying here. She could not live under the shadow of their wing, and go on deceiving them. And she had got to be "fond" of Oakley. It was Arthur's place, where everybody knew him, and to live there was a protection to her, a shield to her imprudence, whatever happened. What else had she in the world? even if

Matilda left her she might have gone on there, living quietly; but for that deception which she could not keep up, which she would take advantage of this once—only this once, but no more. This was one of the rare cases in which the person most immediately concerned judged herself more hardly than others did. Neither Durant nor Lucy blamed her for living here secretly; but rather were both touched by the idea that she wished thus unknown to recommend herself humbly to the good opinion of her husband's parents; but Nancy's simpler straightforward mind felt the tacit falsehood of her position to be untenable. Whatever advantages it might bring her, her duty was to tell the truth, and take the consequences. She had done much that was wrong; but she had never told a lie.

Lady Curtis saw her coming from the window of the morning-room, and could not but make observations to herself upon the fine elastic figure, instinct she felt with some special energy, as the young stranger came up the avenue. What was

it that made her walk to-day with such firm certainty and grace? usually there was a touch of shyness about her, almost awkwardness, the awkwardness which is a kind of grace in its way, the wavering of youth, not quite sure about its own movements. But Nancy was not thinking of her appearance, or that anyone was looking at her; but only of the great moment that was approaching. Lady Curtis came to the door of the morning-room to meet her, holding out her hand.

"This is my pet room, my dear," she said, smiling; "you must come here first. Sit down by the fire, and get thawed, and then you shall see everything. It is not according to the present taste, but for all that I am fond of it. Won't you take off your cloak? We can put it here, or take it upstairs with us when we go. It must be very cold out of doors."

"Not when one is walking," said Nancy, and as she put off her cloak, a little roll of paper became visible. "I brought you the —sketches," she said, with a blush; "they are not worth calling patterns."

"They are a great deal better than patterns. *I* call them drawings," said Lady Curtis, with flattering kindness, spreading them out on the table. What pains Nancy had taken over them! and consequently they wanted the spontaneous grace of the first design, which Lady Curtis had so praised. But my lady applauded them as if they had come from the pencil of Raffaele himself, and showed her crewels and her pieces of work executed, which filled Nancy with awe.

"Mine are not so good as these," she said, shaking her head; "I will take them back and try to do better." She was disappointed, and tears started suddenly to her eyes. But Lady Curtis took the drawings away carefully, and smiled and shook her head.

"They are mine," she said, "you have given them to me. Now look, here is my private picture-gallery, Mrs. Arthur; my son, whom you thought you had met, do you remember? You will be able to make sure by looking at his portrait; and Lucy —you know Lucy? I have been very

extravagant about my children, here they are at all ages. Here is the first of my boy —and there is the last," said Lady Curtis, pointing to a framed photograph on the table. She wondered that the visitor did not move to look at it. Nancy was holding the child's miniature in her trembling hands. She could not have spoken or risen up to save her life. Look at him—she who belonged to him, to whom he belonged more than to his mother—she could not do it! There was something almost more than she could bear even in the child's face.

"The connoisseurs of the present day will have nothing to say to my pretty room," said Lady Curtis; "but perhaps you are of that way of thinking, and like darkness and neutral tints. No? I am glad of that. This is where I have spent almost all my life," she said, dropping into that tempting strain of gentle reminiscence which seems to come natural to us all, when we grow old among the young, as just the other day we were young among the old, and liked to draw that soft babble

of memory from elder lips. Nancy felt the charm of it, which soothed her even in her excitement, and looked up listening with eyes that grew bigger and bigger, like the listening eyes of a child.

"I furnished it at my own pleasure, after I was married, when I came first to Oakley;" she said. "Sir John does not care for these sort of things, he was always pleased when I was always pleased; and all our little talks we did here; and then the children—all that they had to say to mamma, this was the place. When Arthur was a boy at school, he always came rushing in here the moment he arrived; and here they made all their plans, he and his school friend, Lewis, who is a very dear friend still. I think I can see their little faces with the firelight upon them," said Lady Curtis. "My Arthur! Ah, if he had always been as open with me as he was then!"

Nancy was choking with her tears. It was all that she could do not to cry out—it was my fault, it was my fault! all she could to keep herself from creeping to

Lady Curtis's feet, and kissing them, and crying her heart out. She sat still and kept silent, she could not tell how.

"But I must not talk of that, and make myself cry," said my lady, "that would be poor entertainment for you. All these things are presents, they have been brought me one time or another. Sir John gave me my clock; it is a genuine seventeenth century one, and we picked it up by the merest chance. Arthur brought me that Sèvres the first time he went abroad. Come, I have upset you with my absurd talk. I can see you know what it is to be in trouble about those you love."

My lady was behind Nancy at the moment, and suddenly put her arms round her, and gave her a little half-embrace. It was gratitude for her supposed feeling. Nancy stumbled up to her feet with a great cry, "Oh, my lady—my lady! if you knew! if you only knew!"

Lady Curtis looked at her fixedly, her cheek flushed a little. After all she knew nothing of this strange young woman

whom she had received so rashly. What if she should turn out to be — something not fit for the company of good women? She looked at her with a momentary suspicion.

"If there was any serious reason why you should not come into my house, I think you would not have come," she said, with meaning. Nancy did not reply—her thoughts were occupied by a wholly different preventing cause from that which was in Lady Curtis's thoughts; but neither did she quail from the look, which she did not understand. The impulse was strong upon her to tell everything, to go no further, to disclose the whole story now.

"After to-day," she said, with her lips quivering, "I meant, if you would listen, to tell you everything about me. But perhaps, I thought to myself, you would not like me then—perhaps you would be angry; and I thought I might give myself first this one day."

"Poor child!" said Lady Curtis, half smiling. "It cannot be very great wickedness, at which you think I would be

angry, which you tell with such an innocent face. Hush, hush!" she added, "no more of this, here is Lucy. You shall have your day, and tell me after. Before her not a word."

Was Lady Curtis afraid of Lucy *too?* She came in looking as she always did, not suspicious perhaps, but *as if she knew* —did she know anything? and shook hands with Nancy. "You are showing Mrs. Arthur your own room first, mamma; you are telling her exactly what you expect to be said, and coaxing her to praise it. That is what you always do; but papa wishes her to be brought to the library. No, here he is coming after me," said Lucy, as a heavy step came towards the door. Nancy was standing up, tremulous and shaken, her lips with still a quiver in them, the tears not gone out of her eyes, when Sir John came in. He came up to her holding out his large, soft, old man's hand.

"You need not introduce me, Lucy. I know this lady already. She was very kind to me, as I told you. I assure you

that to allow a young lady, and one whom I should have been so happy to serve, to take so much trouble for me, was much against my liking. But my excuse is one we must all come to, even the fairest. When a man is old—"

"I was so very glad," said Nancy, in a low tone, and her eyes, with the moisture in them, looked so appealing that Sir John's heart was touched. He gave a look round, lifting his heavy eyelids to see if there was anything visible that could account for this emotion. Then, seeing that his wife also showed signs of fellow-feeling, he concluded that the poor young widow (as he supposed her) had been telling her story to my lady's sympathetic ear.

"I believe you are going to be shown over the house," he said, offering his arm, "and you must let me show you my library myself. I have not very much," said Sir John with that tone of mock humility which never deceives the experienced, "that is worth looking at; but there are one or two pictures, and some

old Roman rubbish, which, perhaps, you may not care about. Are you fond of antiquities? I know that you are kind to them, at least," he said, giving her hand a little fatherly pat as she put it shyly on his arm. Nancy felt her head swim as she walked through the great hall leaning on Sir John's arm. He talked to her all the way, pointing out one thing and another. "This is one of our treasures—it is a bit of bas-relief found in an old temple near Rome. Have you ever been so far? Ah! then you have the pleasure to come. I think it is much better than going when you are too young to appreciate what you see. Yes, this is my favourite room. There are plenty of books you see—a great many more than I make any use of nowadays—some of them, perhaps, are not quite lady's reading; but there are a great many which I daresay you would like, and which you will always be welcome to. This is one of the pictures we are proud of. It is a Sir Joshua. It is the portrait of my grandfather. Ah! you start, you see the like-

ness? It *is* very like my son. My lady has been telling you of him, no doubt? Yes, Arthur was the apple of her eye; and will be yet—and will be yet, please God."

Nancy did not hear much more. The choking of those tears she dared not shed, and those words she did not say, was more than she could bear. "Oh! please forgive me!" she said, sobbing aloud, "I can't help it. No, no, I am not ill—but it brings so many things back—"

"My dear young lady," said Sir John alarmed. "You have got upset. Shall I take you back to Lady Curtis, or will you rest here?"

"Oh, only for a moment!" cried Nancy, The outbreak had relieved her. He made her sit down in his own great chair, and was silent for a few minutes, looking at her with serious sympathy. She was not afraid of Sir John. He (she divined) would never find her out, however she might betray herself. He was not quick, like needles, like the ladies. There was safety in him. And this sense of security

helped her to conquer herself. She got up presently with a smile, and said she was better. The old man was in no hurry —he was pleased with his pretty companion, and quite willing to humour her. After this, he took her all round the library, not sparing her a single relic. He had not been so much interested for ever so long. She listened to all he said with the prettiest interest, and if she did not say much, what did that matter? "I am very ignorant," she said to begin with, and he liked her all the better. They suited each other entirely. She did not get impatient as my lady did, or make fun of everything, which Lucy would sometimes have the audacity to do; but listened with the greatest interest as if she never could hear too much. The library was nearly exhausted when the bell rang for luncheon. "Lady Curtis will wonder what has become of us," he said, giving her his arm again, "and I am sure I have worn you out."

Meanwhile Lucy and her mother were smiling at each other. "We have no

chance you see, even with your father, against a pretty stranger," Lady Curtis said, "but I hope she is not tired of all these antiquities, as you and I are, Lucy, when we oughtn't to be."

"Oh, she will not show it," said Lucy, with a little slight involuntary touch of scorn; but Lady Curtis did not find this sentiment out.

"Yes, she is a sympathetic young creature. She was all but crying with me about Arthur, though she can't know anything of Arthur. It may not be what hard people call quite sincere, but it is very charming and goes to one's heart."

"Oh! I did not say she was not sincere," said Lucy with compunction; and then the luncheon bell roused them, and they went across the hall to the dining-room, following Sir John, who issued from his library at the same moment, and led the way with his courtly old-gentlemanly politeness leading the stranger. Age is the period in which politeness becomes most exquisite—like that *cortesia* which the old Italians make into an attribute

of God himself. Sir John placed Nancy next to himself at table. She had never sat at a table so daintily served. The big silent footmen almost filled her with awe. She had never seen anything of the kind but in the Paris hotel, which after all was only an hotel, served by chattering rapid waiters, not solemn buckram men like this. Nancy was awed, every moment more and more.

"Now you have had her long enough," said Lady Curtis. "She has to see the drawing-room now, and all the state rooms."

"I hope you have had the drawing-room properly aired. I never had any confidence in that room. I have known it to be cold," said Sir John with a look of horror. "Come back to your own room, my lady, for tea. It is the most comfortable in the house."

"That is on his own account, not ours," said Lady Curtis, as she, in her turn, led Nancy away. The drawing-room was a very large, noble room divided by pillars, and its magnificence again took

away Nancy's breath. They took her all round to look at the pictures, and then my Lady placed the stranger in a large chair before the fire to rest. Never had any one been so anxious about her, afraid to overtire her. Overtire her! if my Lady only knew? Nancy, vigorous and young, could have carried her conductor about as easily as a child; but she could not carry the load under which she was tottering—the load of concealment and, as she represented it to herself, deception. This overwhelmed her with a feverish incapacity. She was glad when they bade her be still. What agitation was in all her veins! and yet she was happy—wrapped in a strange, delicious, overwhelming, painful dream, Was it her home, really her home in which she was thus reposing, or a house which to-day she would leave for ever? She was not able to answer the question, but sat still there, in the winter afternoon, while the sun was still shining outside, in a trance of strange and mingled sensation, lifted out of herself.

The drawing-room did not look towards the front of the house. Its large windows opened into my Lady's flower-garden, a kind of fairy paradise, Nancy had thought, in which the grass was very green, and where there were still flowers. Arrivals or departures did not disturb the dwellers in this Elysian place; but as they sat together, not talking very much for the moment, for the sake of Nancy who was "resting," some kind of indescribable wave of sound seemed to rise in the house. Something of wheels, something of quick steps, then a little distant hubbub of voices, then the ring of several doors opened and shut. "Some one calling, I suppose," Lady Curtis said calmly, "but you must not stir, my dear." Lucy was near the door. What she heard that roused her curiosity, or suggested to her the impossible occurrence which had really come to pass, it would be impossible to say. Her mind was in a state of high tension and excitement, and this confers a kind of second sight and second hearing. She stole behind the great screen that

guarded the room from the possibility of a draught, and softy opened the door. She heard her father's heavy step come suddenly out of his library, and then a tremulous outcry in his usually placid voice. Lady Curtis had begun to listen too. "What is all that commotion," she said, "ring, Lucy, and ask?" But Lucy was out of hearing. She had rushed along the corridor to see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears. "Yes, Sir, it is I; I didn't write, for I did not know I could get here to-day. Where is my mother?" was what she heard. Lucy's impulse was to cry out too, to rush out to the hall and throw herself upon her brother, and it took her no small effort to restrain herself. Her heart gave a wild leap into her throat—and then she turned and hurried back. What was going to happen? "Lucy—Lucy! have you asked what is the matter?" said Lady Curtis, getting up with natural agitation. She thought of Arthur at once, as was to be expected; but she found time even in the tide of rising anxiety to give a kind

word to her visitor. "Never mind," she said, "don't stir—there is no need for you to disturb yourself—Lucy! where are you? what is it?" said my Lady. And then she gave a half scream, and rushed towards the door, pushing back the screen which had veiled the space before the fire.

"Yes, mother, here I am," said Arthur, coming in.

One of the party, at least, had no eyes for him, no thought for him. Lucy did not even look at her brother; and when his eye caught her standing there, and saw this, Arthur, with his arm still encircling his mother, followed instinctively to see what interest could keep his sister from him. Nancy had risen from her seat at the sound of his voice. Every tinge of colour had gone from her cheeks, her eyes looked as if they had been forced wide open by a passion of wonder which was almost agony, her lips had dropped apart. She stood motionless, gazing, but able to see nothing.

"My God!" he cried, and put his mother aside.

Sir John had followed him into the room. They were all there, all who were most interested, and all felt by instinct that something greater and stranger had happened than Arthur's coming home.

"What is it, what is it?" cried Lady Curtis, in sharp tones of pain.

Her son made but one step away from her, and caught their unknown visitor, their strange neighbour, the young woman they had all been so kind to, in his arms.

"No, no, no!" they all heard Nancy cry, shrill and high in terror or anguish, they could not tell which; and then she dropped out of his arms in a heap upon the floor.

"Have I killed her?" he said, looking round upon them with a scared and blanched face, while Sir John and his mother looked at him, speechless with astonishment.

"No, no," cried Lucy, who had possession of her senses; "it is no worse than fainting. Oh, don't you see, don't you see what it is, all of you? She has scarcely been able to keep from telling you."

"What had she to tell me? What do you mean? What is this, what is this, Lucy? I don't understand."

Arthur had one arm under his wife's head.

"She is better, she is coming back," he cried, and stretched out his other hand with one glance round. "Mother, God bless you! You have been keeping her here safe while I have been looking everywhere for her," he said. "If I had not owed you everything before, I should owe you my life now."

"Arthur! What has he to do with her? Her name is— Ah!" Lady Curtis ended with a great cry.

And Sir John, who was altogether puzzled, came forward a step and looked at her where she lay, holding up his spectacles solemnly in his hand.

"I am afraid she has fainted," he said. "I thought she was not very well. It will be better to leave your mother and a maid to manage her, Arthur. We are interested in the young lady, but we are more interested in you."

Nancy came to herself as he spoke, and struggling up, got upon her knees.

"I did not faint," she said, hoarsely; "only the light went from me. I did not mean to deceive any one. I said just this one day; I wanted to see you, and Arthur's home. I did not mean to deceive you. If you please, I will go away, and never trouble you any more."

"Nancy!" cried Arthur, "Nancy!" He put his arm round her, holding her. He had been kneeling beside her while she lay there, and he was not aware of the suppliant attitude which accident made him assume. "Look at me," he said, "look at *me!* If you cared for Arthur's home, did you not care for *me*, Nancy? You shall never go away, except with me."

Nancy got up hastily, drawing herself away from him. She was at the turn of her capricious soul. Would she burst away again, rush out into the cold and the twilight? Everything hung on the impulse of the moment. She gave a wild look round upon all those agitated faces. Sir John had put on his spectacles the

better to understand the extraordinary position of affairs which had begun to dawn upon him now.

"It appears to me," he said slowly, "if I understand, that there can be no question here of going away, no more for this young lady than for any of us. Is it possible—I do not mean to be uncivil, but you will excuse the question—is it possible that you are, as I understand, my son's wife?"

Nancy was caught at the moment of doubt. She herself turned and looked at Arthur. Her eyes softened, her paleness began to glow. He drew her arm within his, and she did not resist.

"Yes," she said, with a long soft sigh. It was hardly possible to tell which was the word and which the lingering flutter of breath.

"Then, my dear—though I have forgotten your name," said the old gentleman, going up to her, taking her disengaged hand, and kissing her very solemnly on the forehead, "you are very welcome in his father's house."

"And me?" said Lady Curtis, with a

little moan. Grammar and emotion do not always go together. "I have only half seen Arthur, and must I turn all at once to Arthur's wife?"

"If you care for me, mother!—"

"*Care* for you! Do you hear how he blasphemes—you, young woman, that are his wife? And he was my little boy, my child before he ever saw you. Care for him! that is what he calls it," the mother said, crying, yet smiling, too, as her manner was. "What is your name? Nancy! Yes, I know it well enough; I only ask it out of contradiction. Here is my kiss, Nancy. I did not know you were my daughter, but I liked you; and that is better than giving you a kiss only for his sake. If you care for him, as he calls it, you will like me too. Where is Lucy all this time, who was in the plot—who knew—"

"I only divined," said Lucy, coming forward in her turn.

But Lucy was the one of all whose salutations were the least cordial. She was glad, but she did not like it somehow. She did not like to hear my lady say "my

daughter." That was an unexpected stab. She went through her salutations very prettily, but in such a way as brought the excited party back to common life.

"And I think you will find your own room more comfortable," said Sir John; "and you are surely later than usual this afternoon, my lady, in having tea."

* * * *

This tea, it may be supposed, was not the tranquillizing draught it usually proved to these agitated people; and it was a relief to everybody when it was settled that Arthur should walk down with his wife to the village to tell her sister of the extraordinary event which had happened, and to make arrangements for Nancy's removal to the Hall. They went out into the dark avenue together, arm-in-arm, glad of the darkness, and feeling it had been made for them, as—if it had been morning and bright, they would have felt that to have been made for them. To repeat what they had to say to each other is none of our business. People do not meet again after such separations without having in

their happiness pain enough to make them humble; and yet that walk down to the village in the wintry evening was worth some pain. Sir John was still standing between the two rococo cupids of the mantelpiece, with his cup in his hand, when they went away. He had come back to the ordinary habits of his life, which, after any disturbance, it is always a pleasant thing to do.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it was a very fortunate thing we got hold of Arthur's wife accidentally, and found her to be so unexceptionable a person, before we knew who she was; and it was pretty that she called herself Mrs. Arthur. I did not perceive it just at first, but of course it was her right name. And all things considered, I think we may be very thankful to Providence, my lady, that things have turned out so well," said Sir John, putting down his cup, and going slowly away, as was his wont. When the door was closed, which he always did so carefully, my lady caught Lucy by the waist, who was going away too.

"My darling," she said, "we must strike while the iron is hot, while your father is so satisfied. Go this moment, and write before the post goes. Tell Lewis to come at once, to-morrow; he ought not to lose a day."

"Shall I, mamma?" Lucy crept a little closer to her mother, who was not forgetting her after all.

"Yes, at once. I hate them all!" cried Lady Curtis with a little outburst, "taking my children from me. But I suppose you will be happier; and you know, as Arthur says, I do care—a little—for *you*."

THE END.

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